A.Kontorovich
VOICE BEHIND
ESCAPE FROM
TARKOV

The second book of the novel based on the video game Escape from Tarkov

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Voice Behind

Try to survive in a city where there's a fierce war for a place under the sun, never stopping for a second! Where, falling asleep, no one can be sure that they'll open their eyes. A piece of bread, a can of food, a pack of bullets: they can cost you your life.

But there's something even scarier here.

The voice behind your back…

No one's seen the person talking, no one's ever met this man face-to-face.

He always comes unexpectedly, and it's only when the cold metal of the gun barrel touches your neck that you realize you've done something bad…

Nothing will be an obstacle for him: not reliable security, not strong walls, not a number of accomplices.

He will come...

Chapter 1

A man in a dark cap peeked around the corner. Quietly. Only a stray breeze was racing over a littered pavement, blowing some rags and other trash. Somewhere in the distance a torn sheet of iron banged on the roof.

Nobody...

The man had a goal.

A corpse.

At one point, it was probably the body of a strong man. Broad-shouldered and big, quite capable of kicking down a door. Then, times changed, and it suddenly became necessary to scavenge for food to maintain the same physical condition. A lot of food.

Without it, the muscles began to dry up. The familiar high-calorie, delicious food that was always on sale in the nearest supermarket disappeared everywhere at once. The supermarket itself was looted overnight. Protein shakes were not useful for long. Turns out they're not very effective at replacing conventional food products. In combination with them—sure, everything is fine. But without them…

The convincing text on the beautiful food boxes turned out to be just bullcrap. The man, who still didn't understand the harsh truth of his new reality, thought he had it figured out—food can be found!! Somewhere there was still food to find. He knew the address of the nearest un-looted shop. He had the strength to break down a door or window. It was only a matter of going in and getting the goods. But a strong fist, alas, is useless against an ordinary axe. And against a sawed-off hunting shotgun... no contest!

The food run turned into a shameful escape. This was evident by the traces of shrapnel on the right sleeve of his good leather jacket. The new masters

of life were not willing to share anything with anyone. It's mine, now scram! Force didn't help. Money ran out. There was only one thing left to do—trade. While there was something to exchange for food the man held on. But even the best modern home theater system is absolutely useless in the absence of electricity. The price had to be reduced. Then again and again.

Hunger is no joke!

And so the contents of his luxurious apartment vanished in exchange for food. But the memory of his former glory—it didn't go anywhere. The man was waiting for his time. Choosing a moment to attack, stun, hell, just snap someone's neck! Others are shooting left and right and nothing! The target was chosen. Accidentally, as it often happens. Dragging another piece of junk to the trader—and here he comes, stomping along! A small dude, how would he do against the trained jock?

But the pitiful squirt turned out to be armed! The bullet from an old PM placed the final period in the biography of the once "effective manager." That's it. One shot and it's over... who needs two degrees and an MBA now? Maybe something else is needed for a successful life in Tarkov today. But the squirt didn't undress the man, he was dragging a heavy load as it was. The wonderful leather jacket was covering the dead man, and the jacket still looked decent. And there's his bag nearby. Can't tell that it contains the speakers from his old home theater from the outside. But you can tell it's not empty!

And so the person in the dark cap looked at the desired prey. Jacket, bag... and there might be something to be found in the dead man's pockets. He was in no hurry. Running fast is the way to dying tired. There is someone's leg sticking out from behind a stone. Must be another one of these rushers. No... no need to rush! Now it's not the spectacular jocks that survive, but thoroughly pragmatic people! Sunburned, with weathered faces, since they spend a long time in the streets. There is no need for muscle mass here, but stamina is very useful. What kind of idiot needs a weightlifter's muscles now?

Do you need to break doors?

An ordinary crowbar is faster and quieter.

It's better to avoid bright clothes—these will be noticed from afar. That's why the small guy is wearing a simple knitted cap—it doesn't stick out, ruining the disguise of its owner. It's dark, not very visible against the background of the earth. The man was lying down... waiting. But no, no one's step is rustling garbage, no one can be heard. Empty... the owner of the dark cap did not run, there's no need. Quietly, pressed down to the ground, he crawled ten meters and stopped again. He listened, waited a little bit, and moved a dozen meters forward again. The dandy jacket is almost within reach!

Bam!

The owner of the dark cap jerked on the cold ground. The bolt of an old Mosin rifle clanked, throwing a cartridge case out of the barrel. It wasn't a quick-fire weapon, but the owner wasn't in a hurry. If you hit your target, you're in no hurry!

"These rats are a weird bunch." Yurets Gruzny drove a new cartridge into the barrel of the old rifle and placed it nearby. "Why are people acting so shitty suddenly?"

Tokha Antic, lying next to him, pressed his binoculars against his eyes, looking at the street. He didn't answer his partner, but Yurets was fine with it. It was par for the course.

"It seems like even the dumbest people should understand by now! It's impossible to survive on your own! Being a rat is never profitable. Just come to some people, take off your cap, bow, and they will accept you! Sure, it might hurt your pride! But your belly is full, and warm too! You respect society, and it will pay you back with the same coin."

"You didn't finish him off," the partner said, still looking through his

binoculars. “He is alive—look how he’s writhing. He must be yelling for sure…”

“So what? Let him yell.... He's gotta be useful for something! He can act as an alarm. Maybe someone else will come to join the party…”

A gust of wind blew in a half-sobbing, half-yelling noise.

“Check it out, he looked like he was so scrawny.” The shooter was surprised. “His throat’s strong though.”

He nodded approvingly, listening to the screams of the wounded man.

“Again, someone else who doesn’t belong stops by, and boom—dead bodies! He’ll think about for a second longer. And you’ll see, they’ll stay away.”

Tolyan the Eyeball, one of the ataman's helpers, came up on the roof with a can of beer and a snack.

“How’s it kicking up here?”

Yurets nodded in the direction of the screamer.

“Yeah, it's all right... Some kind of stray came by. There he is, yelling his heart out…”

“Fuck him, the stray fucker!” The handyman waved it off. “Anyone serious?”

“They were looming around here in the morning,” Antic answered from his seat. “A couple murky dudes. They didn't come close, they watched from afar. They hung around for two hours and went over there.”

“What was the outfit?”

“Not ours, that's for sure. And they didn’t look like warriors, no

camouflage. I think they were looking at the path."

"There?" Tolyan nodded left.

Where he nodded was a beautiful modern building. Or rather, it used to be beautiful. A former car showroom. Nowadays long-legged beauties didn't mingle among the shiny cars, there was no light, no pleasant music. There were no modern cars left in the city, they had time to take them out. It's people that can be thrown away, but an expensive car... for that you can lose your head! It's a mystery where the long-legged girls disappeared to so quickly. Anyways, strolling among bullet-riddled glass is stupid and dangerous.

The car showroom was repeatedly looted for as long as there was anything to take. But nobody tried to capture it. In terms of defense, the building was of no interest—glass and light metal structures. All modern, quickly erected ... Only the cellars were concrete, the rest could be shot through with a simple pistol. The approach is open from all sides, which isn't pleasant either. The time it'd take to reach those cellars... And you'd have to go back too!

So this building stood. By tacit agreement, it was used as a neutral meeting point. The approaches were clearly visible, so it was extremely difficult to bring an ambush group here. The former car showroom was often watched by several groups at the same time, each with their own goal.

No, in principle, it was quite possible to shoot any strangers on the way to the "glass," as it was now known.

Okay, we shot him, and then? Loot the bodies? There are also good shooters on the other side. They'll give us a chance to get to him, and that's where all our luck will run out! And then what's the point of using your weapons at all here? Then you'll have a headache from those guys... Why would you go on the offensive? No, let them go by.

Tolyan asked Antic for his binoculars and scanned around with a clever

look on his face.

“Well, I don't see anybody. By the way, they could be the very people we’re meeting here. They should be arriving tomorrow, so it’s possible.”

He returned the binoculars to Antic.

“So, I'm going to the ataman! Watch out!”

Apart from the two on the roof, there were a few other people on duty. Including those from, let’s say, a competing organization. Kaban also pulled up to the glass with a dozen well-armed guys. He prudently ignored the square, but placed his eye on a detached house, a former office. He was quite satisfied with the position of an outside observer for the time being. The experienced bandit did not intend to take center stage. For two days, Gavrish's men had been snooping around, shuffling all sorts of nonsense from there. Then one of them was shot in the leg, one took the butt of the gun to the face, and the task was completed.

And then the ataman sent a messenger.

* * *

Valek waited for me at the bandit checkpoint. In the morning, the cold wind blew and the ataman’s messenger shifted from one foot to the other, trying to keep warm. What stopped him from dressing warmer? Instead it’s all bluster... won't look so dashing otherwise!

“Morning to you!” The bandit greets me.

“The ataman say anything good?”

“Everything is ready. Took a look around, kicked some people out. Quiet now.”

Today the messengers from the underground dweller should be arriving. So

I asked Gavrish to have his men arrange a meeting. It's a stupid idea to carry a load like this alone, so the bandits will act as porters.

"Well, if that's the case, let's rock!"

Something squeaked around the corner, stones fell down, and Kaban's guard threw up an assault rifle.

"Hey, don't be scared into shooting!"

"Wait…" Kaban raised his hand. "It's Gavrish…"

The office on the second floor of the glass was very small, the former office of some manager. But the view from there was quite nice. If you don't stick your head out, nobody will notice you from below.

"Good health to you!" The ataman greeted the elder as "comrade." "How's life?"

"It's fine," he groaned. "Well? And where are your guests?"

"The guys spotted them, the guy who came from the Predator is stomping here. My guys lead him... But they don't see any 'hoods'... But they still have half an hour to arrive."

The old thug smirked, but with a nod of his head he pointed to a free chair next to him, suggesting they sit down and wait. They didn't have to wait much longer—a couple of people came into the downstairs hall, where shiny cars used to be displayed.
"On the left," Gavrish whispered, "is my boy, Valek. But the second one…"

"Tsst! Got it."

Kaban eyed the people walking downstairs with interest. A normal, unremarkable dude. Skinny, but not skin and bones. Dressed, well, not badly exactly, but let's just say he got a little scrappy. And armed, well-

armed in fact. Today you could get a hole in your head for less.

“A brave client. Walking up dressed up like that in the city, that’s not smart!”

“Don't look at his appearance!” the ataman objected. “He’s not just some rando. His bite can hurt! My boys saw him in action!”

“Okay, fuck it…”

Ten minutes later new characters appeared on the stage. Six machine gunners and three porters—and that's who the old thug looked over with much more interest.
“Ignat..." The ataman indicated one of the arrivals.

“Who’s that?” his young comrade asked.

“He’s from our neighbors. Ignat Kopeyka is something else! He’s been in it with the Hood since ancient times.”

“And you can't really tell... just a man.”

Kaban smiled.

“Don’t say that to his face! You'll see how ‘normal’ he is... Awolf of a man! I am telling you this responsibly!”

“And why was such a wolf was chosen as the guard?”

“That’s a good question,” the old bandit nodded. “You have to use your head to solve it!”

The deal below was over. Having loaded the goods and briefly talked to the customer, the drug dealer's envoys left the meeting place. However, Kaban was not so interested in it anymore. Having leaned back on a wall, he thought for some time. Gavrish didn’t bother him, he understood that the

experienced thief was thinking through something complex.

“Crosseyes!”

“Yes, chief?” The guard turned to Kaban.

“Lift up the boys. We’re leaving.”

“Good!” The guard slipped down the stairs.

Foma’s deputy also came up.

“Tell you what, Gavrish... You bought your life today, I'll put in a good word with Foma. And don't start pouting like a frog on a stump, it’s not for long! Here's the thing... if the Hood came to something with someone wicked, shit’ll get sour. We are not ready for a war. Yet…”
The deputy suddenly picked up the young bandit by the jacket and dragged him towards himself.

“And think about this! I’m not Foma! Bullshit talk won't pass with me!”

“C’mon Kaban! I didn’t even think of it!”

“And don't you start thinking! Remember - I have people near you too!”

He pushed him aside.

“Wait, I'll find you later…”

Papers covering the hallway rustled under the shoes of the large bandit as he stormed out.

Gavrish fixed his collar, smiled ominously, and shook his head. Waiting? We can do that... very well! I promised Kaban I wouldn't even think about it. So I will keep my word! Other people will think and act!

* * *

Again I had to play all sorts of comedies... The porters dragged the whole heavy load into the basement of an apartment building. I placed trap bombs on the door to the basement “invisibly,” using one of the trophy grenades. Enjoy, you guys, I wasn’t planning on entering that place for now.

Well, not entering through the door.

This basement was accessible, though not without difficulty, through the cable manifold. I remembered several such places... In general, the need for electricity, although much diminished now, never totally lost its relevance. Carrying a rechargeable battery to charge my uninterruptible power supply is not a pleasant experience. The laptop ate energy with fervor! Little by little, I can figure out the contents of its hard drive, there was enough interesting information there! True, I had to go into an unknown hole in order to verify this information... I did not consider myself so great. And so crazy. It’s possible, of course, to send someone else, only how would I control their loyalty? Go, find the right place, and with a clear conscience say: "There was nothing there.”

Yes, some flash drives contained not only information, there were also key files that could open doors. But the real puzzle is figuring out which doors. I managed to find some clues on the same laptop, but this was definitely not enough!

Okay, we will think …

Having broken the roof of a neighboring house in a couple of places, I tried to make it look like natural destruction, say, from the rain dampening the roof and the wind finishing it off. From the outside everything seems to be more or less natural. I waited a couple of days, occasionally crawling out into the street, then visited the house. The strained control lines remained intact, no one reached the attic. Cool. I install solar panels, connecting them directly to the outlet.

Insane?

From the outside it might look like utter insanity! I chopped off the power input in the basement beforehand, so there is no voltage in the network, and there was no place for it to come from. And on the floor below the wire itself was cut off, so as not to be immediately detected. In one of the apartments I made an inconspicuous connection to the general house wiring.

The following happened. Panels generate current. It goes along the wire to the fourth floor. There, in one of the “fallen" cabinets on the floor, the batteries are hidden. There are no leaks at this stage, since all the wires leading anywhere else are cut. The other wire, inserted into the vent hole, goes into the cable manifold. And only from there does it enter my refuge.

I came up with this complex scheme a long time ago. I sat, calculated on paper, drew, crawled around basements... And then I crawled around the surrounding houses collecting the parts I needed. Thank goodness that I mostly needed wires. But in the end I have light in my shelter! I no longer need to carry the heavy uninterruptible power source battery to the factory for charging. It is charging well here too. I can work at home.

Yes... I have an interesting home now!

* * *

“By the way…” The shopkeeper pours me a half-finger of a nice smelling drink. “Remember, I asked you about the Nurse?”

“The boys call her the Physician.”

“Well, yeah ... she can be called that too…"

Ogryzko thinks for a while.

“So there is a question …”

“Speak.”

“A person ... a serious person, by the way, comrade! So, he has a task.”

“What, did this madam cross someone’s path?”

The salesman grins.

“No. To sum up, something was stolen from a person. There is a suspicion that the Nurse took this product in. But!” He raises his finger. “The chick is sly! Brought nothing into her lair.”

I wonder what kind of task I’ll get this time? Killing this woman, I wonder? Meh. From the words of the person I’m speaking to, the following picture comes together. The customer has lost a lot of goods. Extremely expensive goods, too. The sly woman also trades in such things, but she does not have more than one or two packages at the time. If she gets an order, she can find some. Only her “search” for it is way too quick. The Nurse herself is clever, hardly leaves her hole. The product is brought each time by one of her henchmen.

“He goes somewhere around here…” The shopkeeper draws the circle on the map of the city. “Impossible to trace further, he dissolves, as if into thin air.”

“Only here?”

“Well, he visited other places a couple of times, but it seems that their main storage is here.”

The task is simple.

They’ll show me the Nurse’s assistant.

The goal is to find out where the cache is located. It’s a big one, since they

stole almost half a ton of drugs! It's clear that they wouldn't put everything in some apartment. Too great a chance that someone accidentally finds it.

"This is what packaging looks like."

He shows me an orange plastic suitcase-container with a big red cross on the side. Army medical kit. You can use it to treat a bunch of things, and it costs accordingly.

Carrying such a thing discreetly… I would have think about it five times!

"Presumably, he does not carry them in his hands…"

"Yes," the shopkeeper says. "The client is running with a backpack. But the thing is, it is always equally full. But these things have to come from somewhere."

Judging by the size, no more than two such suitcases can fit in a usual backpack.

"I will pass on your task. What does the customer pay?"

Instead of answering, the merchant puts in front of me a list:
1. 5.56 mmcartridges.
2. 5.45mmcartridges.
3. RGD-5hand grenades
4. F-1 Hand grenades.
And six more items on the list. You could equip a whole company with this stuff!

"Our customer trades arms. They have their own business with the Nurse, so he doesn't want to be tied to this deal. But this does not mean that he is ready to forgive her. Anyway, do you even care?"

I shrug.

“We don’t give a crap about the woman or the customer. If the client is willing to pay this much, the chief will consider this question. I'll pass it on.”

“Deal!” The shopkeeper splashes me some cognac.

Back in the basement, I estimate my options. They will show me the dude... Most likely, this will happen somewhere near the haunts of the lady. Not bad, I’ll find out where she lodges too. But to entrust this task to one of the bandits ... it’s likely they will inevitably screw up. If such a dubious specialist as me manages to crawl into their guarded base…

No, I have to do the work myself. Not to say that this prospect pleased me greatly, but there were no other options.

* * *

“There!” Sledgehammer points toward the window.

“The curly haired dude?” I ask, although no one else is in sight.

“Yeah. Keep in mind that the boy is smart! He has good ears…” the guard of the shopkeeper presses his lips.

“I’ll pass that on.”

“Then good luck!”

He rises from the bed.

He leaves, and I continue to survey the neighborhood for a while. The object of observation chucks a cigarette butt and disappears behind the door.

Chapter 2

The lady's den was located in a separate annex by some building. What this was before only God knows, the signs are gone. There were no windows in the one-story building, and the only door is hidden between pieces of broken cars. I'm not so dumb as to believe that these cars came here on their own. Yeah, sure, that's how they hit the wall, one by one. Then why isn't there any damage to the walls? No, the cars were destroyed somewhere else, and they were brought here later. Why the fuck though? To set up an ambush right at the door, that's why. Approaching the door closer than a few dozen meters away wouldn't work. Of course, you can hide behind the cars.

Sure, you can, but to do what? There wouldn't be any visibility, and there is definitely some hidden hole in the wall. Through it you can at least see the situation at the entrance. Throwing a grenade, or even shooting the sitting duck in the back are also valid options. Surely there is also a second exit, maybe more than one. If this madam didn't hesitate to screw over her partner, then she definitely has a brain. So she has already figured out all the options of escape a long time ago.

And what is the conclusion?

Simple. None of her people will be wandering through the spare entrances, they'll go through the main one. Let anyone who watches them believe there's only one way in or out! I built my observation post in the most inconvenient place—in the transformer box. The ominous skull and bones on its doors are a lie by now, there's no dangerous electricity here. Why do I think that? Simple! A transformer buzzes while working. This one is silent. However, the conditional reflex stamped into the brain isn't gone, it feels dangerous here. I was wary myself, too, when I was crawling into the box through the broken ventilation grid, subconsciously shuddering. God knows. But the transformers are silent...

Ventilation grilles in such boxes are located on two levels. Upstairs under

the roof and just above the foundation. This is because of the peculiarities of this structure.

So I screw off one of them with a tried-and-tested tool, the one I used on the apartment doors. Nobody notices anything from the outside. The padlock on the front door emphasizes the fact that no one attempted to use this box. I can see the lock well, so I doubt that anyone will come here.

Inside, contrary to expectations, there isn't too much mud and mess. There is even a locker where, to my surprise, I find a bottle of vodka and a couple of cans of food, some fish stewed in tomatoes. In the other compartment of the locker is a folded mattress. Hmm... has someone slept here before? What a novel place to sleep! I would have been scared!

Well, a mattress won't hurt me either... Obviously I don't expect to stay here for long. I just decided that such an observation point would be useful in any case. I return the bars of the grate that I bent to their original position. I have to deal with the nuts and bolts that attached its neighbor to the wall and to an iron strip that ran the whole perimeter of the box. Grounding or something? But now I have a convenient way in. The grid looked like it was whole, the rods were in place. But if you shoved it, it slid off the pins where it used to be attached with screw-nuts. But it doesn't fall to the ground, a piece of cable is tied to the top, and it hangs from it. You get inside, the grid still in place, and let the people chasing you scratch their heads looking for the runaway. The lock is still in place!

People believe it for some reason. They see a lock and they think that no one got in there. Yeah... I'll have to get some supplies here, that won't hurt. Doesn't matter, there's no hurry yet, I wasn't set any deadline due to the unconventionality of the task, and every time I run to my basement is another chance to be spotted and recognized.

Their main warehouse is not here!

In the two days that I've been sitting here, some regularities have become clearer. They have all the little things at hand. When there's something

more or less serious, one of the woman's guards brings it. They will carry some box from the location, and they bring back an identical box in a couple of hours. Every kind of cargo is carried by a different person. One carries bandages and bottles. The second one is responsible for bigger and heavier stuff. It is possible to see it from his backpack, sticking out in different directions, something angular in it. It is quite possible that this is food, they also sell it here.
But the one that I was shown is also carrying a small backpack, only one suitcase fits in it. If you put the second one in, hell if you'll close it. Their customers don't buy it often enough to carry several, it's the good stuff. For the whole time I've been lying here he only made one run.

I begin to respect this Nurse. She acts very reasonably! If something happens, she doesn't have too much stuff at her lair. Otherwise her guards wouldn't be running around. Each one serves only one specific warehouse. Grab them by the gills and only this cache will be compromised. It's likely only she knows where all her stashes are. Competent! I wouldn't have thought of it!

On the third day, I move to the next street. Let's explore another segment of the route which this dodgy dude runs. I'm not going to follow him, I'm not such a great tracker. But I'll observe from afar, no chance in hell he'll spot me.

Then the next street... two days later my ward was almost robbed.

I'm ashamed, but I didn't see the guy right away, only when he opened the window. A reflected sunbeam ran down the street, and that's where I tensed up. Where the hell did this come from?

The sun is in that direction, so what do the laws of physics tell us? The angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection. Is that right? Yeah!

The beam ran over there, sunshine on our left ... so where is the unknown window opener? Can only be in that house, there is nowhere else for him to sit! Yeah, and there's the window, slightly open. That's right, there he is!

When I chose this observation point I looked at all the windows for a reason, to see whether they're open or closed. Here's a window with a curtain, and there's a balcony door completely open. Don't rely heavily on visual memory, it can fail. So I made some notes in a notebook earlier. Now, having checked my notes, I can say for sure that this window was closed before! And there were no curtains in it! And now there is a curtain. It's swaying in the wind.

Stop!

Wind?

Inside the room?

Hmm...

It's a draft! That's what's moving the rag... Well, drafts happen when the windows are open on different sides of the house at the same time. It is not possible with these kinds of apartments, their layout excludes this, since they have all their windows on one side. So, the front door is open. Makes sense, the dude broke down the door, so there is nothing to hold it any more. And he has no time to watch it, he's watching the road. Who could it possibly be? A rival firm? It is quite possible that the order was given to someone else too. The merchant, let's be honest, doesn't owe anything to me. Could have tasked someone else, too. Easily.

But I don't need any competitors! Leaving the observation point, I carefully sneak into the yard of the house I need. On the way I hide and carefully examine the surroundings. The dude might not be alone! But I didn't notice any living villains. There is a dead one lying by a car. Fresh, didn't even start to smell yet. I should check him out later.

Here's the entrance that I need. I think about it, then put the shotgun behind my back, take my pistol out and pull back the hammer. There's always a bullet in the barrel. Quietly walk up... take my time. Running fast is the way to dying tired!

The second floor.

Nobody, the doors on both sides are closed.

The third floor…

I need the fourth, the dude's there. Okay, I'll get there, and then what? But I didn't have time to think that through. A man runs down the stairs. With a sawed off shotgun, by the way! And he holds it like he's in a movie, pointing his gun to the ceiling. Did he decide to act like he's an anti-aircraft gun, or what? So, a 12-gauge double-barrel won't shoot through the concrete slab! Although it's pretty good that he's holding it like that, he won't have time to point his gun down in time to shoot me.

He won't have time anymore...

Bam!

The spent casing hits the wall with a ring.

Bam!

The bloke is twisted around and hits his face on the wall with full force. With a clang, the shotgun falls on the steps. I kick him so he continues flying down, I sprint past, leaving the wounded dude behind my back. For some time he is definitely not a fighter, but his comrades could still be in the apartment! Sticking to the wall, I walk into the doorway gun first.

It's empty

I sneak into the corridor.

The kitchen is empty.

The room is where the window was open. Here it is empty too. There is no

one in the second room. Was he working alone? Toilet, bathroom, no strangers either. Yeah, he was the only one here. Okay, now we can talk...

“Who the fuck are you, moron?”

The dude hasn't really come to his senses yet. The bullet hit him in his right thigh, that's why he spun. Only one hit, I missed the first shot, dummy! But now he feels like shit, he's hurt, and he's hit his head on the wall pretty hard, so he’s not thinking straight now. So he’s not up for tricks...

“Mikha... Mikha the Quick.”

Quick, that's for sure! How he was flying down! Well, I cut his wings.

“And what were you doing here, Mikha?”

“Watching Kostyan…”

It's hard for him to talk!

“And who is Kostyan?”

“He is with the Therapist... a guard.”

Yeah, that's what they also call the Nurse, I’ll remember that.

“And what do you need from him?”

“Hey, give me a bandage! A first-aid kit! I'll die here!”

“You won't die now. You have some time. But whether I’ll give them to you depends completely on how you answer me. Got it?”

“Bitch!”

“And my name is Denis. Nice to meet you!”

I've become tough... That's not good. But Mikha, I'm sure, wouldn't hesitate to stuff me full of lead, so no remorse. I just managed to shoot first, that's all.

“He's... he's carrying some stuff around here. Worth good money.”

“And why here? You too lazy to walk a little further?”

“He has traps... a couple of guys got majorly fucked up from them. Here he is walking down the street, you can work from afar.”

Okay, this question is worth looking into! However, Mikha did not tell me too much. But more than nothing! Wow, he lost a lot of blood. His speech is slurred, he already passed out a couple of times, he's not gonna survive! The bullet must have seriously damaged something.

Give him a bandage? He won't bandage himself up, and I'm too careful to do him this favor. He doesn't have anything else to lose. So I keep a safe distance and have no desire to get any closer.

Bye-bye, Mikha.

"Poor Joe, Bill shot first.” I saw this inscription on a gravestone online once. Sorry, man, you won't even have a grave, let alone an inscription. A double-barrel 12-gauge sawed off shotgun, two dozen rounds of ammunition, and a hand grenade—the whole arsenal of the deceased. I didn't go near him, he kept his hands near his pocket the whole time! Don't know if he would have had the time to get the grenade out or not, who the fuck knows, but it could have gone in any direction... Well, a little canned food, some biscuits and a few other things, chump change.

* * *

Whether it was because of my lousy robber, or for some other reason, I don't see the courier today. However, my time isn't spent in vain, the dead

man told me something. There is no point in mining some intermediate point on the route. I mean, if there is serious fear that you are being followed, then, obviously, it is worth spending some time to ensure your own safety. But it doesn't look like the Nurse's couriers are attacked daily and multiple times. Otherwise they wouldn't be walking alone.

That means the man has something serious set up here. I find the first trap exactly where the dude told me it would be. I looked at it from afar for a while, but saw nothing suspicious. Yes, a regular hand grenade. Smartly placed, the woman's guard shoved it between two boards, protecting it from curious glances. You can't see it from the sides, and when you get closer, it wouldn't matter anymore. Time will allow only a quick curse.

I wonder how he walks here? It is necessary to consider this too, right? I have guesses, but had no desire to play bomb squad. But I'll equip myself with a good place to lie down. There's a car nearby on its side, I'll crawl under it. There was plenty of room under the overturned van. You just need to remove all the garbage so as not to make any noise and give yourself away with a careless rustle. Said and done. I don't have any extra junk with me, I can shove my backpack into that small hole.

It's a little tight here, but that's okay, I don't plan on spending the night here, do I? We'll push this board back, that branch over there too... Stop! Cold sweat covered literally my entire body! Lifting up the board I find that a thin wire leading somewhere upwards! My hand stopped, as if instantly frozen.

Motherf... what is it?!

Came off the car?

Yeah, we've gotwood panel bodywork on cars now? I haven't seen such designer delights yet. Not from the bodyof the car. A trap? Maybe. But a trap means that someone is meant to pull this wire, right? Now it's a little saggy, so whatever the hell is on the other end, I'm not gonna pull it out. But if a hapless smart-ass crawled forward, this would become his cozy

grave.

Should I put the board down? The first decision, and the wrong one. I picked it up and a stick fell sideways. So, if you put this piece of wood down in the same place it will inevitably be lower than it was, and then the wire will be pulled, and whatever the hell is up there, it'll go off. With my free hand I lift small stones and woodchips from the ground. I put them under the board. Not enough!

But there is a brick nearby!

Leave it alone, it is a little too obvious here. There is concrete and glass all around, where would the brick come from? Did it fall off some wall? Yeah, all tidy, not even chipped. And that's not counting the lack of traces of cement mortar, or whatever the hell they use to lay them? Whatever, it can't be that clean! Fuck the fucking brick… Paranoia? Sure, but so what?

I rake up all kinds of garbage with my hand again. A can, all crumpled... get over here! My improvised foundation is ready, I can lower the board. Up top in the body of the van, which has obviously been raided by all the sneaky "comrades" a long time ago, as expected there was a RGD-5 grenade, which is where the wire was going. And I'll tell you, the villain made the trap smartly! He didn't tie anything to the pin, that was pulled out entirely. Around the smooth body of the grenade, he put a wire ring holding down the safety lever of the trigger mechanism. That's the part you have to hold in place so that the grenade doesn't not explode prematurely. Pull the wire a little bit and the ring will fall off. Not by much, but the lever will stop holding. Then the grenade will go off in the van. The thin tin of the car is no obstacle for the shrapnel and the blast wave, the person downstairs will get hit hard.

So...

The pin wasn't left behind by the unknown villain, he took it with him, I guess. And now I need to find something to replace it with, and quickly! I look into the van's cabin. I don't know, sometimes they keep all sorts of

metal crap there. So I'll find the... what?
A pin?

Yeah, right!

Some thin nail... I don't find anything like that, but when I examine the opened glove box I find some papers. Fuck the papers, but there are some paper clips! This is much better! They're strong, the bastards, so they don't break right away. I used to twist many in my time. The paperclip is a good fit to replace the pin. I couldn't make any a safety clip to go around the striker lever, but I bent the paperclip around it. So not only will this prevent it from falling out spontaneously, but you won't be able to pull out the paperclip quickly yourself if you wanted to. The grenade goes into my pocket, and I'm freaked out so I sit down near the brick. What could be there? I'm not afraid of it being too convoluted, where would a regular guard find something like that? He simply doesn't need it: for his task, ordinary grenades are quite enough.

So... The brick is very tempting. Fuck, it's not even tempting! It's suspicious! Here, in this particular place, it simply couldn't have fallen from anywhere. Overhead is the body of the van, so it couldn't have fallen from above. If it has been lying here since time immemorial, the van would have crushed it into dust with its wheels, the brick is lying right on the track left by the wheels of the overturned car. The driver was probably in a hurry, and, having gone off the road, dug up the lawn and hit the wall of the house. It was, quite expectedly, stronger, so the car tipped over. And after that someone brought a brick and put it under the body, right in the track. I lay down on the ground and look at it. I notice on the ground a trace left by something like a ruler. The kind we had at school, made of black and blue plastic. The strip is about two centimeters wide and, I dunno, about half a palm long, the rest is under the brick. So something flat was lying on the ground, and then it was pulled out from under the brick sideways. Apparently, the ground was moist then, that's why there's a trace.

Well, I don't have a strip of plastic, but the knife will work! Almost the same width, except maybe not as long. Why did I think that? If this ruler

was pressing something down, then that something is still there. They pressed the whole thing with the brick and then pulled out the plastic. So, shall we take the risk? Holding the brick, I gently push the blade under it. I might be wrong, but it seemed like it stuck something for a moment there...

Yeah!

The tip of the blade comes out from the other side. Turns out my knife is wider than the ruler … Well, shall we take it off? "What kind of devil is making you do this shit?!" my inner voice belatedly warns me.

Yes, the brick is up!

There are no surprises, just another grenade in the hole under the brick. Also an RGD-5, and also without a pin. The lever was pressed down with a piece of plastic, and on top of it, not letting it straighten and throw off the fucking thing, was the brick. Its weight was enough to hold it all together. Now my knife is lying across the hole, I hold it firmly with my hand. The villain put a grenade without a check, placed a piece of plastic on top, put the ruler across the hole, making the whole structure stable. Then the brick was laid down in its place, and the ruler was pulled to the side. Some clever man would have gone there, and the brick would be in the way, and he'd push it away. Mm-hmm... and hell if he'd be able to go anywhere in that case, you couldn't jump out of such a burrow quickly. Yes, a smart man was operating here. Is it the guard? A talented guy, the motherfucker!

If I hadn't taken out the garbage, that's the way I would have crawled in. And of course, this brick would have ended up neatly in front of my face. Well, I still have a paperclip, so this grenade is soon right next to its sister. All right, that's enough for today! Such nerve-wracking days will make me lose weight very quickly! After reaching my lair, I consider the possible options. It is better to postpone all the shooting and running until another day. I was lucky today, the owner of the sawed-off shotgun was careless, but what about tomorrow? I'm not a professional shooter, so I shouldn't tempt fate.

Conclusion?

We walk quietly and do not attract attention.

And as a consequence, sleep less, unfortunately!

The Nurse's courier comes and goes unpredictably, so running after him is stupid. He'll notice and that's it! So, I have to wait on the route. Now I at least know a couple of points which he won't miss. No one will simply mine all the surroundings, the lady ain't an ammunitions trader. Every grenade is worth something. So, this dude will set traps only where it is really necessary.

I go to bed early to be sure to leave before the moment the courier goes somewhere.

Luckily I wake up relatively early, it isn't even dawn yet. I should get myself a wristwatch with an alarm clock, the thing can come in handy. There was a time when they only made them with alarms, it's only now that the pendulum of fashion swung back... I eat nothing, grab a can of canned food and a pack of biscuits. I'll get water on the way, I noticed a couple of puddles with relatively clean water.

If you'd told me a few months ago that I would be drinking water from a puddle without wincing, I'd have laughed! But I do, and I feel quite well. In very critical cases I dilute cognac or vodka in the water and purify my drink. No need to cringe, that's what the ancient Romans did! Every soldier had a flask of wine with them, diluted with simple water. That's how it was disinfected... And what was fine for the cool Roman dudes is definitely okay for a simple systems administrator. Although, that systems administrator is long gone by now…

I lie under the car, carefully disguising my ambush with all sorts of garbage. At least I don't have the smelliest garbage around, that's not too bad! Although it has been laying here for a long time, almost all smell has gone. However, the dude doesn't come by! Well crap, does that mean I have to

sleep here? I'll have to... But I won't be able to sit through another day, there's half a pack of biscuits left! Although this time fate turned out to be favorable towards me, the dude came around soon after. I don't see him, I hear him. Broken glass crunches under a shoe, there is a lot of it lying around. Someone's coming! Fighting my natural desire to turn around and look back, I try to breathe less and quieter. I'll stick out my face, I'll see a courier, then what next? I already know where he will go. There's only one road from here, on both sides there are walls of the houses, nowhere to turn. But he could see my curious face. I'm sure the villain looks at this overturned car sometimes to see if there's a sign of an explosion. If these are his "surprises," he will definitely look over here.

So I lie quietly.

Now I can hear the footsteps. The man probably walks carefully, and sometimes looks around. I put my head down and pull my hat down so my white skin doesn't glow. What if he notices? Scary to lie like that. There is an unpleasant dude nearby. What if something crawls up his ass and he suddenly decides to look under the car, what then? I'm lying with my feet to the entrance, I can't even react in time. And he'll kill me… "Hold on!" I calm myself down. "What would he stick his nose in here for today for? Yes, seems there is no need..." But cold sweat begins to drip down my forehead.

He's gone!

The devils carried him past!

Now I can lift my head... After taking a few more steps the courier stops. Carefully looks around.

Another step.

Squats down, puts the machine near him and does something.
What? What?

Can’t see from here.

Okay, I note the location. The man gets up, puts the machine on his shoulder and moves on. He's darting his eyes around! And that’s good! Why? Because he isn’t looking under his feet! There’s no danger there! I was smart enough not to go there, I have strong doubts about the kindness of the dude I’m following. Let him go, I'm not going to rush to follow him. But I will crawl closer to the spot he looked at. I saw how confidently this man was walking. He showed caution only when he reached that specific spot. So it’s possible to follow his trail until that point. Which is what I do. But then I have to use my ingenuity to look for a new place to lay down.

I don’t find a spot quickly, and what I find is much less comfortable than before. Especially because of the smell. Just ten meters away, near the path the courier followed, is a dead man. Obviously he’s been there more than a day. I have to assume that he was one of the comrades-in-arms of the guy with the sawed-off shotgun that was unlucky enough to run into me. Must be the way they learned about the traps... Well, the dead don't bite. I read this saying a long time ago in a book. Even more true when the dead are at a distance. And the unpleasant smell... well, I’ll have to live with it!

I crawl like a snake under a pile of garbage, trying not to rustle it too much. I won't say that I’m fully hidden, but I suppose that if you look at me from the path it wouldn’t be easy to see me. All the more so when I'm lying down. My face is dirty, my beard is growing out, my clothes have long lost their purity and charm… so there is still a chance. And I have a shotgun handy in case it goes badly.

An hour passes.

The pebbles creak under somebody's soles. Well, we know whose soles those are...

There he is, my good friend! The backpack looks stuffed, obviously the dude is not empty-handed. But I don’t care, I'm not going to touch him. Okay, he’s crouching down again! And does something... Disables the

minefield? Maybe he turns something off to get through. That's an interesting idea, what can he be turning off? I've heard about hidden devices, things that react to vibrations in the ground and stuff. I haven't seen them, I won't lie. But I did hear and read about them. But all these devices are electricity hogs. And batteries are in short supply these days! You'd have to use a lot! But who the fuck knows what this smart-ass has? Maybe he has a big stash of batteries?

Yeah, he's gone through the dangerous area, and is looking around, but he's not looking at the dead guy, which is a mistake! If only you'd raise your eyes a little… here I am! The dude crouches down to the ground, and I raise my head carefully. I can barely see him closing a lid. I lower myself into the pile of garbage again... Okay, the dude is gone, his footsteps are quiet in the distance. He is definitely coming back from the warehouse, judging by the backpack. By the way, why did he take so long? I doubt he was going somewhere far away, I'm sure he's got a stash somewhere nearby. But what was he was doing there for almost an hour, if not more?

There's the path, I can even see the marks left by the rifle the man placed on the ground next to him. Well, yeah, that'll happen if you always put it in the same place. The dude even left some plywood there to keep the gun clean. But he forgot about the barrel! He left a characteristic mark on the ground.

So, here's where he crouches down.

But no matter how much I turn my head, I find nothing.

What was the lid he closed here? I take my knife out of the sheath and gently stab the ground like I've seen it done in the movies. That's how they look for mines, and other things they put in the ground. You have to poke the ground at an angle to avoid inadvertently hitting the fuse. I'm not an idiot, my memory still serves me well. After a few stabs, the tip of my knife hits some wood. That was clear from the sound, wood makes a kind of hollow sound when you hit it with a knife, you know. I guide the knife along the contour, it's definitely some kind of box. The sizes are very similar

to the box he had in his backpack. They buried it in the ground, put some garbage on top, so you can't see anything. But now we won't hurry! The owner of all this stuff is not a simple or kind man. Could he have shoved some nasty stuff into this box already?

Easily.

But did he do it, that's the question.

Let's suppose that he stuffed it with nasty stuff. And some grenade goes off inside...

No.

It's not gonna go off.

Because then everything that's in that box is definitely gone. And there is no way to control any mine that's in there. Does that mean there is nothing here? As far as I could see, he closed the lid with one quick move. Well, you have to be some kind of magician to turn on something with that move. Having found the edge of the lid, I move aside, duck to the ground, and carefully raise it. If something clicks, I'll try to bounce away... It didn't click, but the loops squeaked. And what is inside? Hmm...

Attached to the bottom of the drawer are two metal rings held by a steel pin. Connected to the pin, passing through the wall of the box, are three thin cables. As long as the pin is in the rings, the cables are pulled taut. Which means some traps I haven't seen have been armed. And if the pin is pulled out, the tension on the cables will loosen and...

And what?

I don't know... But the man wasn't looking under his feet and he wasn't afraid of anything. I have to assume that there is something similar on the other end of the path, a similar box hidden somewhere. This dude doesn't seem like a dolt: he's got his back covered. If the pin is inserted here, it is

out on the other side. He walked through, opened the lid, and turned the system back to armed.

All right, let's risk it!

The pin is down, it came out of the top ring. Now let's tilt it to the side and up! Okay, the cables are sagging. I put the stuff on the bottom of the box and close the lid. As I walk down the path formed by the blank walls of houses, I have all sorts of thoughts in my head... Hardly any of them good, all sorts of bullshit enters my mind...

Okay, so...

We need to look somewhere around here.

But pedantry is harmful in some cases! You can't overthink it.

I spot a piece of plywood lying on the ground. Immediately the thought flashes in my mind, the same thing was by the box on the other side! Well, maybe not the same, but similar. This dude put his rifle on it. So as not to dirty his weapon with the dust. I sit down and look around. Well, there was no trace of barrel of the gun here, but shoe prints are in abundance. Okay, where's my knife?

* * *

Back in my hideout, I try to figure out what my options are. Okay, let's say I understand the passage through the minefield now. Then what? You can only close or open it behind you, and in no other way. In other words, what I know about the arming mechanism of the mines doesn't give me any advantage. If he raises mines on one end, I can dance around like a shaman on the other, but there will be no effect. I have to keep moving forward, but how?

For the next couple of days I work as a demolition master. I break through the walls of the building, whose windowless wall was facing this way. In

some cases I push the doors down, in some I climb over through the balcony. The building turned out to be non-residential, some kind of administrative building. The first floors were occupied by warehouses for all kinds of stationery, furniture, and other office goods. But the third floor used to be quite inhabited. There were all sorts of offices and conference rooms.

I was lucky, because most of the walls were between different offices, one or two bricks thick. I didn't have to break through concrete! As it turned out, my opponent's cunning showed in the fact that he thought about this too. There was an entrance to the building that was locked tight. I had to climb through the second floor, dragging a folding ladder from a nearby house. I wasn't lazy and dragged it, which saved me from what I found next!

The only ground floor window that was suitable for climbing in had a trap, a familiar F-1 grenade with a cable. I'm not such an idiot after all, I understand something about this stuff! Another grenade, also without a pin, was slipped under the front door. As I understand it, in case someone decides to kick it out, it'll blow the poor asshole to hell. Shit, I'm going to become my own bomb squad at this rate! In any case, what I saw made me believe that the warehouse was nearby. There's no point in mining the neighborhood somewhere halfway to the stash. And besides that, I knew this route was valid, otherwise my opponent wouldn't have spent so much time setting up these traps.

By the way, I found a lot of paper clips in one of the offices. I grab some, just in case. I also remembered from some of the books I had to put some clips into the collar of my jacket and shirt too. I had read that they could be used instead of a pin.

The fire escape, which was in the other wing of the building, was locked from the outside. Remembering the courier's cunning, I reasonably assumed that he had hidden something unpleasant there, too. So I didn't touch the door, and instead climbed onto the roof. There, tying up some boards I found on the roof with telephone wires, I made an improvised

bridge and climbed onto the roof of the next building, an ordinary residential building. It didn't have any traps. No matter, I still decided to go down using the same folding ladder, also through the second floor window. Although... Why are there no traps?

The answer turned out to be very simple. There was a wall around the administrative building, fencing off the territory along with some warehouses. They probably belonged to this office before. And that's where my opponent was going. From the window on the fourth floor of a residential building I see it quite clearly. Emerging from somewhere in the ruins he slowly walks to a small building in the back of the yard. He was at the door for a little while, then climbed in. And he left with his backpack full. Obviously, my desire to rummage around his warehouse was strong! But almost immediately it died out ... Not the kind of dude to just leave everything unguarded. I bet climbing over the fence won't be simple either. He had to have thought this option through, no doubt! Fuck that... Gambling with mines? No fucking way! I'm not being paid enough for that!

I had to find the warehouse! Well here it is! Clearing the path here was not part of any contract! You want it, you do it. You probably have your own bomb squad. For a separate fee I can specify the best path, and that's enough of that!

I don't go back to the transformer box. I can come back later, there's not much valuable and useful stuff there. And, frankly, I don't want to walk in that direction. Fuck knows what the courier has on his mind. Usually he doesn't make two trips in a day, but what if he does today? And to plan for a long detour...
Laziness is what stops me—how long will it take to get there, pack up the goods... It took more than one go to get all my stuff there, so it'd take at least a couple trips to bring it back. It will be much easier to pay some bandits, for a fraction of the haul they'd carry a demon if they had to! And in case of an emergency, I now have another hiding spot with some supplies in it. So for now, I don't need to empty my hiding spot out. Perhaps the first impulse was the correct one—let everything lie there until its time comes.

By the way, that's not a bad idea!

It would be nice to have temporary shelters in different places just in case, right? I mull over my options and walk down the street, trying not to show myself in open spaces. There isn't much peace and mutual assistance in the city now. It's best not to not stick out anywhere if at all possible. And my caution bore fruit!

I hear the steps from afar: a group of people were stomping towards me.

Man... not the best spot!

On the left is a high fence, so I couldn't jump over it in one go. On the right is the wall of some industrial building, with no windows or doors. Run back? About a hundred meters, and in an open spot. The bullet will catch up. Forward? Even stupider... There is some shelter here, a large pile of garbage. Getting in between it and the fence... well, it's worth a shot. At least they won't notice me right away. In any case, I'd have a chance to make the first shot. A shotgun at close range, as I already learned, is a serious argument in any disagreement.

It is possible the people will just pass me by. There aren't many people who want to climb rubbish heaps, even now. I don't have any squeamishness anymore. Everything that could have rotted has done so a long time ago. So there are no smells either. There wasn't even much smell originally, this is construction waste, not household. Probably something was repaired or cleared behind the fence, and all the junk was simply dumped over the fence to be taken out later. In the past I saw stuff like that all the time.

I climb carefully behind a metal box. It was rusted though, but it hadn't fallen to dust yet. And if this thing doesn't cover you from the bullets, it does cover you from curious glances, very well in fact! Okay, now to crouch down...

* * *

The stomping of feet gets louder, and it is already clear that several people are coming. More than three, but how many more? Heavy breathing, they're carrying something. Great, so they have something to do and there's no time to look around. The steps sounded very close, and through the small holes in the box I can see a group of sloppily-dressed people dragging handmade stretchers. There is something under the tarpaulin, something heavy judging by the breathing of the men carrying it. And behind them, with a hunting rifle on his shoulder, a guard lazily strolling?

No, not just a guard, a convoy guard!

This man looked like one. A security guard looks around attentively, and this one was walking lazily, almost like he came out for a walk. Bang! The handle of the stretcher breaks with a crack! And the cargo, ringing and banging, falls to the ground! Well, judging by the sound, there definitely is… was… glass there.

Yup, bottles are rolling on the ground. Were these people dragging booze?

That's a shame... Many of them are broken now, I catch the specific smell!

"You fucking cunt!"

The guard transforms.
He was just sleepy and lazy, and now he is all thunder and lightning, expressing his opinion about the mental abilities of the men with many curses.

"What the fuck am I supposed to say to Makar now, you dumb goats? You stupid cunts!"
He raises the butt of his rifle.

"Quick, I said, fix the stretchers! Pick up the bottles! All of them, even the broken ones!"

"And where should I put them?" one of the porters asks him.

“Where?!” The guard looks around. “Ah! There’s a box in that garbage pile, bring it here! We'll put them in there!”

I raise my shotgun. He really didn't think about this, the box is just two meters away from me! But the task is clear to the person who asked the question, he is coming my way with the sense of purpose of a tank. In a few steps he runs up to the pile, pulls out the box, which turned out to be unexpectedly light. And the rest of the garbage, which was previously held by the box, crumbles. The rusty box leans to the side, uncovering my hideout.

“Hey! Who the fuck are you, asshole?!” The convoy guard throws up his gun.

And he will shoot...

If he has the time. My shotgun has been primed for a long time!

Ba-bam!

A sheaf of buckshot flies out of the Mossberg’s barrel.

You were off by a second, dear. The distance is very small, literally ten meters. Buckshot at such a distance reaches its target in a compact heap, not too scattered. So I have the chance to see a physical manifestation of the word “mind-blowing” with my own eyes...

Brrrrr.... that was nasty!

The rest of the crowd freezes. Well, yeah, a 12-gauge shot next to the ear doesn’t facilitate quick thinking. The mind thinks to run right away. But there is nowhere to run, so they are frozen. So, what do I do with these smart-asses? There's nothing to shoot them for. They don’t threaten me in any way.

“Well, what are you standing around for? Think fast, scatter, scram!”

“Where to?”

“Shit! Up a cat’s asshole for all I care! What, no one has a house?”

They shift from foot to foot, glancing at the body of the convoy guard.

“And then where would we get food? Who will feed us?”

I know this voice...

“Hey, look at me!”

That's right, the face is familiar! But where did I see him? And I heard his voice too, and not that long ago!

“What's your name?”

“I’m Andrei…”

"Andrei, pour some water!”

That's where I remember him from... I heard that voice in Makar's barracks back then. In the morning they would yell for him, and he always dragged in a bucket of water. A barracks water system of sorts...

“What, you're carrying booze instead of water now?” I laugh.

He looks at me, confused, but suddenly relaxes.

“Denis?”

“Recognize me now? Yeah, it’s me. What the fuck brought you here? Pretty far from your base.”

“We went to trade. Well..." he looks at the body of the convoy guard. "Of course, he went to trade. And we are the porters.”

“Is that like a promotion or what?”

“Yes, I don't go around houses anymore!” Andrei gladly confirms. “It's better here!”

I look around the whole company and smile. Their clothes...

“All right, fuck off in any direction. Grab some booze, you’ll have something to sell. Here’s your food! You can even get some gear for that. So you’ll have some options! And now you have at least one gun!”

“What about you?”

“I have my own things to do! You have no beef with me, so let’s part ways. I can give you something to eat, and you’ll figure out the rest later.”

“Thanks!” Andrey livens up. “Because this morning I only had water and biscuits.”

And these dolts are thinking this over? Living on bread and water, and not dreaming of escape? God truly acts in mysterious ways.

I put the shotgun over my shoulder, take off my backpack and squat.

“I'll give you a couple cans of food... And soup... three packs. This will be enough for a few days, and by then you’ll find someone to trade with. Since you were walking around, you should know their locations.”

“Thank you!”

He seems too excited... why would that be?

Sparks fly in my eyes, and the darkness suddenly comes down from all

sides…

Chapter 3

Water!

It's coming from all sides, flowing into my ears and nose. Hard to breathe! Damn it!

I fell into the river?!

But where did the river come from... Shit, I can't see anything!

A hit!

That was on the ribs! And definitely not a rock, feels nothing like it. Feels much more like a shoe.

“More water!”

“Hey! Enough!” I didn't even recognize my voice.

“Oh, fuck! He woke up!”

A rag is pulled from over my eyes, and I close my eyes for a second because the light is too bright. And immediately after that there is another kick. I was right, they are kicking me... I think it was the same person the whole time. I try to get up, but I find out that my hands and feet can’t move. For quite a simple reason: they’re tied up. I writhe on the ground, trying to turn over somehow.

“Lift him up.”

Someone's hands jerk me upright.

I look around.

Goddammit...

I know this courtyard disgustingly well. Makarov's estate, that's where I am! Yes, and the roof of the sadly familiar barracks.

And in front of it is a crowd... looking at me menacingly.

I don't have a backpack anymore. I don't have my weapons either. I don't know what's left in my pockets, but I suspect that it's not too much.

"And what is his name, you say?"

Here's the owner of the place himself. He stands to the side, so I didn't see him right away.

"Denis! He used to live with us in a barracks! They put him on logging and he fucked off!" That's my old friend Andrei in a hurry to speak up.

"Logging, you say…" The gang's ataman examines me from head to toe. "Not quite a wimp... I believe you... How did you escape?"

So... He wasn't briefed, then? Seems that way... Well, yes, the penalty for criminal negligence would have followed swiftly!

"He…" My acquaintance stutters. "Well... someone slipped on the stairs and the log pulled to the side. And the window broke from the impact, fell out frame and all! Two of them fell out. Lionya the Bone and this dude... Lionya was not lucky, fell to his death! While Denis... he survived... and escaped!"
Yeah...

They didn't see me jumping on "the Bone"... Or were afraid to report it then. And now it's too late to tell the truth!

"So he ran away, huh?"

Makar leans down. All my equipment is on a tarp in front of him.

He looks at it carefully, picks up the gun, then sniffs it

“Recently fired… interesting!”

The leader gestures for a chair to be dragged in, which he slowly sinks into.

A kick. I am pushed closer.

“Got healthier, filled out. So he wasn't living off the garbage dumps! The guns are decent, the clothes aren't as torn as some other’s. Didn’t even get too shaggy! Which means somewhere there is also a razor and a blade. Where did you get all this from?”

Immediately somebody hits me under my ribs with a rifle, and quite hard! A kind of hint at the undesirability of silence.

“So… I work… as a courier…”

Makar nods, his lips tight.

“Mm-hmm… mail? Or pizza delivery? Maybe booze?”

“I carry papers. All sorts of junk as payment. So… little things.”

“Mhm… and my boy? Killed him out of fear, huh?!”

“He could have killed me!”

The ataman grins crookedly.

“And he would have been right! There is only one punishment for escape!”

The gangster is not a fool. The interrogation is very skillful, with him carefully digging into the details. He is in no rush, sometimes returning to

previously asked questions. I don't know if his entourage understands. It was clear from their faces that they would have gladly killed me after the first few answers. But their leader is in no hurry.

“The Predator… Has anyone heard of this dude?”

Nobody had, and they are in a hurry to report that.
“So, that’s all!” The leader summarizes. “There is no such dude, so there is nothing to talk about!

But the place where I was hiding out all this time, fattening up, is of much more interest.

“If you give up your stash I won't give you to the boys. You will live. Not like a baron, but you will live! If you don't, you'll die rich! Your choice! Maybe it’ll be a comfort for you on the other side…”

There's nothing I can do, and I giving him a detailed description of the transformer box. I explain how to get there and how to get in.

Makar suddenly looks happy.

“So, you say, you hid right under the nose of this woman?! Hmm! Cunning! Must have been feeding off her.”

I hurry to confirm his guess. Let him continue to consider himself the most intelligent...

“Cross-eyes!”

“Yes sir!” One of the gang answers.

“Grab a couple guys and take a walk over there.”

“Got it!”

“All you find you bring here!”

Makar turns to me again.

“Until they come, you live. If there is some shit there... I mean, you understand, right?”

They don’t take me to the barracks. They just leave me in the yard, handcuffed to a post with regular handcuffs. They put my hands behind my back in such a way that they were looped around the cold iron, clicked the bracelets shut and quietly dispersed to handle their affairs. The damned place was living its usual life. A porter team passes, pulling something to the warehouse. Talking about something, the patrols pass by slowly, they used to walk here before too. At first glance, nothing has changed since I was here. My clothes dry, and, of course, I become thirsty right away! The back of my head hurts from being hit by something hard.

This sucks.

I guess impersonating the henchman of someone serious didn't really work, Makar simply didn't believe it. And why would that he? He's a powerful boss, nobody's bothering him here, what predators would he be scared of? And it’s hard to expect that he would believe in the existence of this mythical character! But from now on I’ll know! You can't turn your back on anyone! No one at all! Wounded, sick, no one has any friends here! If they’re breathing, they’re dangerous! Shit, now I want to eat too...

* * *

“So…” The Ataman ruffles my stashed stuff with his foot. “Well... that’s not a lot.”

Sawed-off shotgun, grenades, canned goods and the other trifles did not make him happy. He does like the fact that I gave up my stuff. He immediately makes clear to me how much he liked that.

“I don't like to be cheated. I don't like it at all. You haven't fucked up yet. Okay... I keep my word, you will live. And now for how you will live…”

Makar looks back on his people.

“Any thoughts?”

After listening to everyone, he sneers.

“You don't have any business acumen..." The leader says. “Oh, my God, who am I surrounded by? You’re just a bunch of fucking idiots, there's no one to talk to!”

He squats down and rustles my things. He looks at the bags of German tomato soup, wrinkles his forehead, as if trying to remember something.

“So! You,” he nods in my direction, "are a criminal. Ran away, fucked my man up, you should be killed for any of these screwups! But I gave my word, and my word is solid!”

The crowd around him noisily endorses the ataman's words. Makar nods, satisfied.

“It's never too late to put you in the ground! But who will reimburse me for my losses? That's not enough," the leader pushes the shotgun with his foot, "to make it up to me! And so you will work!”

Well, you can run away from any job. Dude, you didn’t really think that that through!

“But they won't put you on logging, that has to be earned! For now you stay here... As you can see, we don't have dogs, and that’s not okay! Initially you will be a doggy! And then... then I will see.”

“Woof! Woof!”

You ever think about what it's like to live as a chained dog? Well, people should think about it, there is no pleasure here. There is a cable between two columns, with a chain attached to the cable. It's attached firmly, so it can't be torn off. The other end is attached to a metal hoop around my waist. The hoop is tightly fastened with thick bolts, the nuts on it were tightened using a hammer. All the fucking threads were knocked off, so now they can't be unscrewed. You can run along the cable, a few meters to the side, as long as the chain allows. And that's it... no more freedom to move.

"As long as the dog barks, he is fed. Well, can be fed..." Makar explains. "Barking is your job. And he who doesn't work, doesn't eat!"

I can only run on all fours, because dogs don't walk on two legs! My "job" is to notice the people passing by and report them to the guards. By barking, because dogs don't talk. If no one is around, I can sit down. Not for long: anyone who passes by can kick me. And that's fine, the dog should feel the will of his owners! Be afraid of them and respect them. The cable hanging on the pole has been worn down to the metal, which means somebody was already running around like this, so the chain has polished the rope. Strange, I don't remember anything like that. I didn't see that when I was here. So, this punishment was introduced after my escape. And since the rope is so shiny we can imagine how many times the chain went back and forth. My predecessor was running around a lot... I wonder what happened to him?

There's a bowl lying near the fence, and sometimes something edible is thrown in there. Or they can forget. Rain is a good reason not to go outside. Like an unfed dog is really a problem! It'll live... However, sometimes they can throw an unfinished can of food. Once Makar noticed that I was trying to lick a jar of fish in tomato, and punched a guard in the ear.

"You fucking serious? A dog fed with human food? There's dog food for that!"

And now I sometimes get what they feed the slaves here, canned dog food. If someone doesn't finish theirs, which rarely happens. Already in the first few days I became completely stupid, so unexpected was this transformation. If a man with a more fragile mental makeup were in my shoes, he'd have gone off his rocker by the second day. I never thought so much anger could be in a person!

Slaves, the passing guards, they all make fun of me. If they were too lazy to turn off the road and kick me, they would simply throw a stone or a stick at me. And then they came up with some new entertainment.

“Hey, Lassie, come here!”

And I come, refusing to obey an order... It’s better not to experiment.

Thud!

Kick under the ribs!

“Go!”

But my old acquaintance, Andrei, got the expected promotion. Because he hit me on the head, he was transferred to the guard. They gave him a sawed off gun and a leather jacket, so he struts around in his new outfit. Happy as a clam! Every time he walks past me he doesn't miss a chance to throw something at me. And, of course, the compound’s hairy foreman, Grisha! This bastard didn't plan on dying at all, on the contrary, he got bigger, the bastard! Got himself a couple of big dudes as an entourage. Walks without a convoy, like he’s trusted. Grisha comes to visit me every day and leads excursions for those who do not understand. Using my example, he explains what can happen if they don't listen to his instructions. Obviously his explanations involves kicks and other fun stuff.

I wish it would rain or something... Really want to drink! And they haven’t poured water into my bowl in two days. I can't remind the guards, dogs don't talk! A women's laughter? Am I hallucinating... No, really, women's

voices! Oh, right... Makar has women here. A flock of girls comes out into the yard. They's dressed in flashy, provocative clothes. Well, why the fuck not... there's a whole warehouse right here, take what you want!

Madams went out for a walk, and what's wrong with that? The weather cooperates, it's even warm.

"Oh, a new dog again!" One of them wrinkles her nose. "And probably smells as bad as the last one! Scram!"

"He is not a cat! That's not what they say to dogs!" Her girlfriend corrects her. "You have to say this—get out of here!"

A stick flies in my direction.

I have to run, but I can't move.

"Nina…"

My voice sounds hoarse, but you can understand the words.

"Oh, it also speaks!"

"Nina... hello…"

The girl stops and looks at me in surprise.

"How do you know my name?"

"Nina, I'm Denis."

Her forehead is wrinkling and trying to remember something.

"Denis? What Denis?"

"I walked you home... at night. Remember, when we were sprayed by a car,

you hid behind me."

The girl shrugs her shoulders.

"I've been escorted by many people... No, I don't remember! What do you want?"

"Drink…"

"Oh, my gosh! The doggy is thirsty! Well, I want to pee so let's help each other out!"

* * *

Evening.

Slaves return, bringing in the day's bounty. After the roll call they're given food and driven into the barracks. They lock the doors behind them. Makar, as is customary for him, takes an evening tour. Passing by me, he turns to the guard.

"How is he? Does his work?"

"He does now, boss! Got used to it…"

Raising my hand.

"Well, Well." The ataman turns to me. "I allow you to speak!"

"There…" I nod at the gate. "Bushes... You can't see or hear from here. Someone can approach."

"So what?"

"I could guard there too."

The ataman critically examines the place. The cable doesn't go there, not long enough, and the chain can't reach it."

"Cross-eyes!"

"Here I am, boss!"

"Hang one more cable there. Transfer the dog there in the evening. Let him guard."

"Will do!"

"And also... The dog... feed him, he deserves it!"

In the morning I observe the following: a few slaves, under the supervision of a guard, hang a new cable near the gate. To do this they had to dig in a new pole. It took them a while, but by lunchtime they finish. After that they were sent to other tasks, no one is allowed to just hang out.

"Woof! Woof!"

It's raining!

Great, now a couple of the dishes that I dug out of a pile of garbage and left out will be filled with water. For a while the issue of drinking is solved, that's good!

"Woof!"

The day is coming to an end, so the crowd of workers return from work. By the way, a curious novelty! Makarov's slaves are dragging bricks, planks, and other building materials. Is he going to build up his own base?

Rather, he's strengthening it. It's easy to approach this place from the side, and if a sniper lies down somewhere near, I don't like the chances of anybody here! The tin walls of hangars and barracks don't even protect

from pistol bullets. I have to assume the leader also came to the same conclusion.

“Woof!”

After dinner, two guards come to me. That's been happening every night from the beginning. One of them keeps me at gunpoint while the other one opens the lock.

“Go!”

Now I’m at the new place, fastened to a rope.

“Well! Guard here now!”

The wind blows a handful of sand in the guard's face, and the last of his words is replaced with curse words. There are no fences, no buildings, so the wind is raging. I wouldn't say I'm comfortable with it, but I’m kind of getting used to it.

“Woof!”

And another day...

Makar, out on his daily rounds, nods at me as if to say, “Try harder! You keep it up and maybe they’ll let you haul logs again…” The lock clicks like it always does and I run along my usual route. It rained again and I hurry to my dishes. I can drink one to the bottom today! In the evening, everything repeats itself. Two convoys, a lock... But on the next evening the lock didn’t want to open. The key went in three quarters and that's it, wouldn’t move. Well, frankly speaking, I wasn't surprised at all—after all I did put sand in the keyhole. But I didn't tell the guard about it, seems I forgot! So he curses in vain at the damn iron and the people that made the piece of crap. I put my hand up.

“What do you want?”

“It was windy, all sorts of dust could have gotten it... Maybe I'll guard here today?”

The guard looks at the lock, puzzled, scratching the back of the head. They both leave. False alarm? Will they leave me here today? Not a chance... The prospect of earning a reprimand from the ataman does not please anyone. So in ten minutes the whole procession comes back to me. Four slaves accompanied by another escort dragging two pieces of wood and a piece of metal rail. Um... why do they need the rail? Everything becomes clear quickly enough. Stumps are stacked one on top of the other, then the rail, and on it the lock. A sledgehammer comes down, and pieces of metal fly everywhere. The end of the stubborn piece of metal! But it's too late, the warehouse is closed and Makar has the keys! So there is nowhere to get a new lock until morning... However, the guards are not discouraged. They let the slaves go with the wood and rail, and the guards on duty lead me to the place I serve. One of them removes a pair of ordinary handcuffs from his belt and snaps one cuff to the rope. The second goes around a link on the chain around my waist. That's it! Cheap and simple, sand is no threat. Having pulled on the handcuffs and after making sure that everything was in order, the guards leave for their post. It's not too bad for them there! A cover from the rain, walls to protect from the wind and cold, and they even have a stove inside! And they can look outside through a window, which allows me to see there are three of them in the booth. Everyone looks in their own direction, only the back side is unguarded, but there is no need to watch there, there are other guards for that.

And me... well, I'll run like this. I can even get up at night, the guards usually don't react to that. Back on the first day I searched all my pockets and learned that I had been thoroughly searched! Left without anything at all, not even a handkerchief, let alone anything more serious. Even my belt was taken. So I had to hold my pants with rope... well, at least I have that! Once again I see how not thinking outside the box will cost you. In any situation. Be it software development or any other activity. Maybe it saves time and money, but that’s not guaranteed either! Those who carefully searched my pockets were looking for specific things. Something of value

first and foremost. Guns and ammunition—well, that goes without saying... Edible things, sure. Well, none of these can be hidden in the collar of a shirt, so nobody checked there. They didn't think I sewed a poison pill in there, did they? That would be paranoid... And this is where I stashed a few pins and paper clips. I had some in my jacket too, but they took that away. Well, for a dog my own skin is enough!

If you didn't know, it's relatively simple to open handcuffs with a needle or a thin nail, even if they're locked with a key, though that's more difficult. Just in case I had a nail too: there's a lot of random stuff on the ground. That's what you get for dragging building materials through my patrol path. Sometimes something falls off. With a little squeak the first cuff opens. The second follows... I lift the chain from the ground and, wrap the quietly clanking iron with a piece of my shirt I tore off. Now, run! And fast! Obviously some superman from a movie would never do this. No matter how long he sat there chained, his fighting capabilities wouldn't have been affected at all. Armed with the same chain this hero would defeat the guards, take their weapons, and then… By morning he would be done for sure. And on the ruins of the gangster's lair he would embrace the emotional heroine with his tired (and certainly bloody!) arms.

Yeah…

But I'm no fucking superman.

I'm not gonna try to kick the door out. There's no fewer than forty bandits here. Playing Terminator with such a big crowd is not the most reasonable course of action. I doubt that my former girlfriend likes me much, so she won't play the part of the damsel. And in that case fuck experimenting! I have a few hours to make some distance between me and this "hospitable" place. And you can be sure I will try my damnedest! I'm happy imagining the face Makar will have in the morning. And I have a rough idea of exactly where his cronies will run. It's a pity I don't have grenades, I would have given them such a fireworks display on their way! But I don't have any grenades. In general I have nothing — no weapons, just the handcuffs. I'm not counting pins and paper clips. By the way, I'm don't pity the guards,

they will definitely get a whooping! Well, fuck 'em... they deserve it! Since I have to travel mainly in the dark, the road to my cellar takes a little more time than planned. I may be hungry, but I'm in one piece! Hunger, unlike a hole in the head, can be cured quickly.

Food!

And clean myself!

I am generous with the expensive gas, using up a whole portable burner can. In the end I get two buckets of warm water! I also manage to cook some food and eat it while I prepare for my shower. To wash myself I left my lair and went to the basement. Here, in a corner, is a floor drain. I stand above it and pour water from a ladle. I ruthlessly scrub my dirty, caked over hair.

Razor!

Should not forget that! I doubt my stubble is attractive. We don't have barbershops here anymore.

That's it!

Relatively clean and even shaven, even if not too carefully. I don't care!

Now sleep...

And a sip of cognac, obviously!

* * *

"Man, your face…" The huckster shakes his head. "It looks like you've been on bread and water all this time!"

"Minefield…" I shrug my shoulders. "You won't gain much weight there. And you're likely to lose the weight you have, rather than put any on!"

The huckster is clearly confused. As Sledgehammer kindly informed me, I've been written off for a while now. And suddenly here I am! Hamlet's father's ghost... By the way, I even look like a ghost. Ten kilograms have definitely disappeared somewhere. But everyone is thrown off by the smell of cognac! I might look like a homeless person, but they don't smell of cognac in the morning, due to the absence of this product in their daily diet. But I had a reason to drink a big shot of it…

"So you've been crawling around over there all this time?"

"Not only there. But for the most part."

I already knew that the same task had been given to Gavrish's bandits. Three of them were buried only yesterday. By buried, I mean written off: nobody found the bodies.

"Then spill it! What did you find?"

I'm interested in payment—nothing has changed there.

"Okay, write this down…"

I'm simply not physically able to drag away the whole fee I get, I'm not strong enough. But there is a well-established scheme for this, I used it to get food. This is how I'll handle this now. Actually, I won't be able to take everything right away in any case, since the trader Mr. Ogryzko doesn't have everything on hand. Yeah, well, I assume the customer didn't pay anything upfront. But I am calm, I've confirmed my reputation to the trader once again, so I'm not afraid that he'll screw me. For now, anyway. But now I don't have a shotgun. Both it and my pistol have new owners. Which is not too bad, I have an identical pistol stashed. Should have mastered the assault rifle a long time ago, actually. Wouldn't hurt. Sledgehammer offered me an interesting device. A rifle. Semi-automatic, but can shoot in bursts if needed. It has powerful cartridges too, I don't think even a bulletproof vest will stop this bullet. The rifle has a cool-

looking sight and a big, almost a third of the barrel in length, silencer. It's pretty big—the whole structure is mounted on bipods.
The thing is heavy and bulky, almost a meter long. I can't run with it. But there's no need to, you need to shoot this from a long distance, try to make me out from so far! The rifle comes with a hundred rounds of ammunition. It turns out that not any old bullet will fit! You need special ammunition! Well, that's tempting, of course, but I'm not a sniper!

The guard smirks.

"I am not a super-precise shooter either! But I will definitely hit something from a hundred meters with a sightlike that!"

Generosity of the soul compels him to pull out five rounds of ammunition from somewhere to let me try it out.

Chapter 4

The street isn't too busy in any case, and now that we've informed the bandits of our desire to test out a gun, it's completely empty. At the meeting point, the roof of the five-story building, two of Gavrish's guys are waiting for us. Yurets Gruzny, the sniper, and Tokha Antic, his assistant.

"What's good." The second guy raises his cap.

"Hey!" Gruzny lifts his palm slowly. "Are you meant to be the shooter?"

Yurets nods—he's the shooter!

"So… enlighten us, the rubes, about this gun."

Yurets slowly picks up the gun.

"Well... this thing is not too bad. SVU-AS. Or an automatic sniper rifle if you will. Not exactly stock though... someone has already played around with her. The silencer was changed, and the sight is new too."

He disassembles the rifle with a few movements. I try to remember, because such a specialist will not always be on hand to consult with me. I haven't decided on the rifle yet, but just in case...

"Well... the gun's a worker, it's been fired…" The sniper's spinning the gun in his hands. "The buttstock is also redone a little. It's not guaranteed to be better, but it won't kick so fiercely. But the sight, yeah, it's pretty good!"

He presses something on the side and shows me.

"If you press it here, you get the rangefinder. It's built-in. The distance is in meters. Can you see the red dot?"

"Mm-hmm."

“And now?”

He presses a button, and numbers appear up top—one hundred and thirty-four.

Another press and the dot suddenly shifts. It rises a little higher.

“There is a ballistic calculator inside. You enter the type of cartridge and it shows the approximate shift of the hit point at this distance.”
“How do you do that?”

“There should be a special table…”

Sledgehammer scratches the back of the head.

“We're going to have to look for it, I think there were some papers that came with it.”

Yurets smiles.

“Whose gun was it?”

“Just... there was one client who passed away. Probably ate something that wasn’t fresh…”
Clearly, they killed this dude themselves. It's very possible that the deceased was well known to Mr. Ogryzko. That's why he was offering the gun from under the counter. The weapon stands out, and it’s likely the trader is also familiar with it.

I call Sledgehammer to the side and ask the question. Will I have any problems with his boss later? The guard bites his lip for some time, thinking.

“Not likely. It was last week when the owner passed away, right near the next building. Someone fired from afar, and bye-bye! When we ran up, he

wasn't breathing anymore. The shooter must have been scared off, too, Oleg told us that somebody made some noise near the next building. But it was getting dark... so we didn't go anywhere. We picked up the gun, and some other stuff…"

Fuck if I know... maybe it's true, and the guard wants to make his own little side-hustle.

"So this sniper says that it needs some special ammunition as well. Will you find it?"

"Well, if we don't have any, then Prapor can definitely find stuff like that!" Sledgehammer tries to calm me down. "He won't break our balls on the price, especially since…"

And that's when he cuts off.

Yeah... that's who ordered the hit on the Nurse. That's a sneaky woman! I heard about this trader, he's not a simple man! You have to have steel balls to screw him over, here you can pay a pretty price for stuff like that.

Meanwhile, Yurets finishes examining the rifle and passes his verdict.

"The gun is good! The Mechanic has definitely worked the silencer. And worked some magic on the trigger too. The stock is nice too, with carbon. These things are usually made to order."

"And?"

"It's a nice thing to carry around! Though the weight is almost the same as it was, but now it fits in the hand so well…" The sniper clicks his tongue in admiration. "A damn fine thing!"

"How does it shoot?"

Our consultant loads the rifle and looks around.

“Do you see the car?”
Two hundred meters away from us is a half-destroyed truck. Apparently, the driver couldn't handle the car and clipped a pole. The car, of course, spun around, so it hit the wall of the house with the side. That's when its journey ended.

“I see it.”

The shooter kneels down.

Bam!

Shit... I thought it’d be louder than that! Although if the mysterious Mechanic worked on it… then maybe that's the way it should be. And I'm standing right next to it! The bullet utterly destroys the surviving side mirror of the truck. Well, as far as I understand this stuff, hitting such a small target with someone else's weapon... You gotta have talent for that!
“How about I try it now?”

Yurets smirks and hands me the weapon.

Well, I don’t hit the mirror, obviously. Not a sniper, you need half your life to learn that! But I destroy the windows in the cabin of the truck with pleasure. None survived. It's a pity the bullets run out.

I bargain for the rifle, trading in almost all my ammunition for imported weapons. I have no need for them anymore. I also have to pull some other stuff from the stash. Happy with this turn of affairs, Sledgehammer adds four more packs of cartridges to the rifle, and I buy fifty more from a huckster.

Now I have enough ammunition to train. Of course, I won’t become a sniper. But I'll almost certainly hit a stationary person from a hundred and fifty meters now. Maybe not with the first shot, but definitely with the second!

I had a lot of time to talk to this sniper. He turned out to be very knowledgeable, he's been through fire and water and saw a lot of things. He shared some skills with me, especially since he found me to be a very grateful and open. You can't take everything to the grave, so why be greedy! Since, as I understood from some conversations, there was no chance to leave the city, even for more experienced and skillful dudes like him. I was just a blip on the radar compared to them. However, I avoided answering personal questions from the sniper and his assistant. Just said I'm just a fixer who doesn't know much. And the questions were... very, very difficult, I'll tell you that.

The question is, do I have other things to do?

And what kind of things?

There were no urgent cases. But one needed to be handled immediately.

To get even with Makar and his henchmen.

This character was gradually expanding the geography of his presence. His trusted people have already trampled a path to the hucksters. And the hucksters had a lot to offer. This figure will become a serious man and that's it! Sooner or later our paths will cross...

Why would I think that? Well, I saw the bottles of booze on Ogryzko's shelves, the same that fell from the stretchers of Makar's handymen. Someone will say, "There are many similar booze bottles!" There are, I agree. But branded with stickers from a particular store, Night Flight, there aren't that fucking many of them... And most of the booze exhibited on the shelves of the huckster had these very stickers. And this once fashionable shop is not far from here. So the chance to be identified by one of the henchmen of this slave owner was far from miniscule. Quite real in fact! So I look around... I don't have a concrete plan. Just the basics. Just a few specific things I want to do. So I decide to build on them.

* * *

An ordinary house, a nine-story residential building. The next-door house was cleaned today by a team of "rippers," that's the proud name for Makar's teams of scavengers hunting for other people's goods. After they left, I went there quietly — there were no doors left intact. So, tomorrow they will work another house, the one next door. Well, I know how they set this up. The first to arrive are the guards, who immediately set up a perimeter in case the slaves try to escape. This is the only way now! In my day, this knowledge cost me a broken tooth, the easy stuff is over now! Now you can't sit around in the shade! Then a group of guards enters the house, and they go up to the top floor, checking all the doors as they pass. Open apartments are quickly searched for people and weapons. And other stuff, of course...
After that, the group upstairs is joined by the rammers. They bust open every door on the way down and are accompanied by one of the convoys. Those who sit upstairs wait for the rippers and walk downstairs with them, searching the apartments on the way. Well, of course they don't do the actual digging through other people's stuff, that's the slaves' jobs, they're there just to preserve the order.

In my absence the scheme has not undergone any real changes. Why the fuck would it change? It still works.

The railway nail, the one used to attach the rail to the crossties of railroad tracks, is almost imperceptible compared to a steam engine. It is absolutely incomparable in size and weight. But in some cases, they say this very locomotive can be easily sent off the rails by an improperly placed railway nail. I saw that in the movies! A single grain of sand in the clockwork can cause havoc too… And when there's many grains of sand?

The entrance door was iron, as usual, with the typical code lock, which, due to lack of electricity, wasn't working. Keeping my rifle on hand, I run through the floors quickly. Some doors are open, but most of them are locked. No one seems to have gutted this building yet. But more importantly, no one lives here now. There's no footprints, and dust lies on

the stairs (by the way, where does that come from?), not disturbed by anyone. The stairs haven't been used in at least three or four days.

I go downstairs and tie an F-1 grenade to the doorknob. I pull out the pin and put the grenade lever on the metal hydraulic arm above the door that, when electricity still was working, used to swing the door shut. It could stay here till the end of time. There is no wind, and I can't imagine wind so strong that the massive door suddenly opens. I reach the second floor, open the window a bit and exit through it onto the roof above the entrance, closing the window behind me. Lying on the roof, I look around. No, I can't see anybody nearby, and nothing indicates the presence of strangers. I jump gently to the ground and quickly move away from the building.

I've set up my observation deck in a separate building. I opened the door and threw all kinds of rubbish out on the street, so everyone could see that someone has already rummaged through it and that all the valuables have been taken ages ago. So this building is of no interest to rippers. I ignored all the rooms and climbed high up under the roof, putting a few planks on the rafters. There's a relatively decent view of the house I left behind from the window.

Now I can sleep! It's late and getting dark outside.

By the way, I learned a few lessons from my past mistakes—this time, a watch vibrated on my wrist. It's an alarm clock that can either beep or vibrate. The trader has a lot of crap like that and they're cheap. I turned off the sound immediately, I remembered in some movie that the protagonist was almost killed because of his watch beeping. And this is not a movie, no one will give me a second chance. Before the arrival of the Makar's henchmen I even managed to have a snack, opening a jar of canned beans. I also went downstairs and relieved myself in a corner in one of the rooms. I didn't go outside to pee, just in case… In the evenings people try not to walk here, but the chance of meeting some intruder in the morning is pretty substantial! I'd rather wait for the dark when I have some trump cards.

Chapter 5

Security and the rippers arrived in about 30 minutes. Their approach was marked by the noise produced by the rammers—their battering rams are sometimes just thrown to the ground to give their shoulders a break. The heavy metal falling from almost two meters onto the asphalt makes a very loud noise! I heard it clearly from about five hundred meters away. Well, I remember what it was like transporting this device...

Here they are... The column of people, all wearing worn, drab clothes, appears from around the corner. Now it's time for a smoke break. The slaves are resting, waiting for the guards to take up positions around the perimeter and for a few people to go up to the top floor of the building. Well, I'm waiting for that too. The explosion sounded a little hollow. Probably because the metal door had already closed behind the people entering—guess that automatic door closer still worked. But that didn't have an impact on the effectiveness of the grenade I had planted—the door was ripped off the hinges and flew out. Several voices cried out inside at once.

Immediately the playground in front of the house became an indescribable mess! The perimeter security guards pricked up their ears, pointing their guns around. A couple of people rushed to the entrance, keeping their weapons ready. The slaves were also driven there. Soon I could see the results of my work. Judging by the appearance of the bodies, one of them was dead and three others were injured. Now they were screaming their throats out. One additional person didn't seem injured. But looking at how he was tilting his head, trying to understand the questions being asked, it is safe to assume that he has been hit in the ears pretty hard. In other words, he went deaf…

Well, not bad for my first time!

As you might expect, all the work that day went to shit. The slaves, gladly tossing the damned log on the spot, dragged the wounded and dead to the

base. The convoy followed, angrily pointing their guns in every direction. I didn't see anyone off, I didn't follow anyone, they're not kids, they know the way. But a post-mortem could follow, and that was worth preparing for! Therefore, having made sure that all the guests had vacated, I crawled to the industrial equipment left behind and slipped a grenade under it. There was almost no risk, the heavy iron thing would reliably hold the trigger mechanism in place.

And now we sit and wait. The investigation team stumbled over in a couple of hours. Obviously I had already left my position by that point. There was a grenade left behind, due to my natural meanness (or was that something I learned?), also without a pin, in case somebody turns out to be so stubborn enough to go to the attic. Well, there will be an unpleasant present for them there... And while they can look for me through the optical sights from a fairly long distance, there's no chance they'll actually see me from this far. So it played out as expected—the team that came here in search of the unknown villains began with a thorough inspection of the entrance. Makes sense and quite expected. It is also natural that the results of their running up and down didn't lead to anything. But, they didn't scour the neighborhood. Well, one more grenade for me to take back... As I expected, the morning crowd appeared on the horizon, but with an updated line-up. Security was strengthened (why?) and had new faces.

They followed the same pattern as yesterday: these people have no imagination, not a creative bone in their bodies! They took up a position, carefully went through the entrance—and today's explosion rocked the rammers again. The metal thing crashed to the ground again. I strongly doubt that anyone will have a desire to pick it up again. Even under the barrel of a gun… Not for a second was I tormented by regrets about the fact the explosion hit the slaves this time! They deserved it, by the way! Who hit me over the head with a stick, huh? And when I was chained up nobody even threw me a breadcrumb! Okay, fuck the breadcrumb, I can chalk that up to starvation. No one gave me a sip of water! And there was enough of it there... I gave you a chance to escape when I shot the convoy guard—why didn't anybody even try it?

“You die today and I'll die tomorrow!” thinks the jackal. It’s what they’re thinking too. Well, they got what they bargained for! In short, the job wasn’t off to a great start. Watching the retreating column, I think about it and decide nobody will come back here today. And I have things to do... now I have to go underground.

* * *

The lack of water was quite an unpleasant surprise. The faucets that were running in the morning just croaked sadly. All this time, Makar somehow didn’t think that the water could suddenly run out. But it happened. It is clear that death from thirst wasn’t a threat. Whatever comes, there were plenty of cans and bottles with different drinks in the warehouse. But you wouldn’t wash yourself with mineral water? Or cooking soup with beer, even though it’s exotic, it just doesn’t vibe with the local culture.

It must be said that even in this case the bandits made an effort. After running around the neighborhood the patrol found that, in some places, oddly enough, water was still running. In the yard, a barrel on wheels was waiting for its time to come. Five minutes to prepare, and the water-carrying barrel left the gate, driven by slaves. They quickly reached the area where water was still running, and spent much more time filling the barrel. To fill the barrel, they had to carry water using twenty liter canisters. Okay, they managed this. They also filled the canisters, to have some extra. They turned back towards the base, and just when the gates of the base became visible, one of the slaves screamed! He dropped to the ground and grabbed his leg. Blood ran down. No one heard the shot. Not least because the improvised water carrying system had ridiculously squeaky wheels.

“Leave him! He’ll make it some way! Water! Push the barrel!” The guard barked, looking around.

Yeah... fat fucking chance…

After the third person fell wounded, it became clear that no one would be allowed to push the barrel. The loud guard got a bullet in his thigh, after

which he dropped out of the game for a while. Haphazardly supporting each other, the slaves reached the gate of the base. The guard was left behind on the road. Clouds of dust from the bullets eloquently danced, blocking anyone from approaching him. The hint was clear, and no one wanted to lose their head. The wounded man breathed his last twenty minutes later. Or, at the very least, he stopped responding to the shouts and didn't move. After some down time gun barrels appeared in the windows of the barracks—Makar was ready for battle. But there was no one to shoot at. An hour later, with shields made from scrap, several guards left the gate. Nobody shot them.

The brave foursome reached the barrel—still quiet. But to move a half-ton contraption with this many people... not the easiest task! Well, if you can't take the barrel, you can at least grab a couple canisters! Clearly this is not enough for a hundred people, but at least that's something! They took off two canisters quietly. They barely made it ten meters, then one of the shields exploded! It was possible to see the whole neighborhood through the hideous hole. The shield was no match for this weapon. Not at all. But it did give some protection, illusory as it was! At the very least, the person couldn't be seen, so it'd be hard to hit on target. It's difficult to run with both a heavy canister and a shield. Something had to go. But what? Dump the water, Makar will kill you. Dump the shield, get shot by a sniper. And if you take the risk? The first risk-taking character didn't get too far. At first, he was hit on the shield. Having gone through, the bullet hit the runner in the shoulder. On the road fell his shotgun.

Next to it, pressing the wound with his hand, laid its owner. The canister, which rolled away to the side, was shot through in turn. Gurgling merrily, water poured onto the road. They dumped the second canister and no shots followed from one side. Which was not true for the base: heavy fire was coming from there! Every kind of gun was fired, from pistols to machine guns. Even shotguns, although the nearest house was about eighty meters away. Not a fraction of the buckshot could even reach the sniper. Whether it was these shooters, or someone else, it wasn't clear, but the second canister was shot too, but the surviving patrolmen reached the shelter without further losses. So they played their opponent in this case.

However, the opponent did not remain in debt for long, and the windows were breaking and crashing loudly. Though the villain shot from a distance, it wasn't any easier. Bullets easily pierced the thin metal walls of the simple buildings. There was almost nothing monumental here ... Sure, no one was injured at the base, and the fire was more trouble than threat. The people had enough sense to not run out from behind cover.

Having made several shots, the villain fell silent and didn't show himself any more. Which made it easier for no one. Just recently, work has been completed to strengthen the perimeter of the base. An additional incentive for erecting this was the escape of one of the slaves. Now all the approaches to the barracks and fences were surrounded with barbed wire. That's besides the other barriers that were built earlier. So it is best not to try to crawl through discreetly or run past all these obstacles! And now it suddenly turned out that there is only one entrance to the base, which is also the exit. Makar could hardly imagine the moment when he would suddenly be under siege, but he was prepared for this just in case.

It turned out that there was no assault yet, but it is almost impossible to exit the base. His preparation worked against him. The leader of the gangsters was well aware that only a few people were working against them, no more than a dozen. Taking such a fortified base with forces like that is impossible, even in theory. These shooters obviously have some other goal... but what is?

"Hey…" Makar called out to one of his henchmen. "I have a thought…"

Chapter 6

When a man with a white flag appeared at the gates of the base, I mentally gave myself a top grade. It's possible to figure out a bandit. It's not easy right away, but still... I thought that I understood Makar, more or less. He is a man that's rather intelligent, has a good head. But he created a situation for himself where he simply did not have any options. He is forced to maintain the image of cool and crazy dude that he built in the eyes of his people. Who could tell me, why on earth did he need elite booze? Hell, the warehouse is full of crap like that! No, he sends slaves to the trader... These girls, too. There are several of them. And he does not share them with anyone. And not going to. Started a harem for himself?

No, it's simpler. He's a tough guy. Taller and stronger than anyone around. And therefore he can afford what others are deprived of. This is what the women and the elite booze are about. I was put on the chain in public, as if to say that this is what will happen to anyone who dares to disobey the almighty boss! The element of intimidation, sure... But in fact he's an ordinary burglar. He doesn't intend to fight anyone, which is why he constantly strengthening his base, to make it so that the thought never even crosses anyone's mind. Basically, it's supposed to project the message that anyone who tries will die right there, on the approach to the base. Other gang leaders are busy expanding territories, scooping up valuable objects for themselves, or even trying to chop off whole parts of the city. And this dude only guts apartments. Claiming any warehouse or shopping center is too scary for him, scary dudes with teeth could come from all sides. But nobody will care about an apartment... Who, pray tell, prevented him from filling the barrel with water in advance? No, he consoled himself with his imaginary coolness. Like, who would dare to pull up on me?! Pay for that! For this self-confidence ... The parliamentarian with the flag had already walked a hundred meters and was approaching the water-carrying device. And he, too, is scared. Can't see any weapons on him, at least he had enough brains for that. Another fifty meters, he slows down, he doesn't want to be out of sight. Well, I guess that's enough.

“Do not turn around!”

The guy froze, even his foot still in the air.

“What do you want?”

“Makar… he wants to know who you are and what you need.”

“I got an order on him… from the Predator.”

“From who?!”

“You deaf?” My whisper sounds weird, but that’s even better.

“No, no… I just haven’t heard about him.”

“Now you have. So, we have a hit out on your boss. As well as for everyone who gets caught in the crossfire.”

“How much you want?”

So, the gangster decided to haggle. Well, that makes sense, he obviously does not want to fight!

“Walk forward.”

“There, in the ditch, under a cloth you’ll find something…” There he finds my old dog chain. The one with the hoop that once served as my belt. Oh, I had to break a sweat when I was sawing the damn nuts off…

“Recognize it?”
“Uuum…”

“You humiliated our man, you put him on a chain. The one who did this should take that place. And then we’ll leave. But not before we see it with our own eyes! And you’ll give us some stuff from the warehouse, this is not

up for discussion!”

“And if we refuse?”

“Then fuck you! We actually get paid per head… The more dead dudes, the more we get. That's it, talking time is over! Don’t forget the chain!”

* * *

Makar will not accept such an offer, for him it’s as bad as death! His own guys will tear him to shreds if he shows the slightest weakness. Yes, he is scared and he doesn’t want to fight. But he will be forced to. And fear is a very bad adviser… A volley bangs from the direction of the base, that’s my answer. Today they will try to break through, the leader will give out supplies of things to drink from the warehouse. There is more alcohol than there is drinking water. Much more… You could bathe the whole lot in just beer! It’s easier to convince drunk people. The ataman is not afraid of an assault, he is confident in his fortifications. This is how he will sell it to his men—we have a fortress here that no one can take! How long can these silly snipers sit in the ruins? Here we have food and drink, more than enough! Unbreakable fortifications! And a warehouse full of clothes! And to wash their faces, are they are going to use beer, too? When indiscriminate shooting rang out from the gate in the morning, I realized that the morning hangover was starting.

No wonder—everyone wants to drink. And if you drink beer and cocktails all night long then by the morning you will be in quite a predictable state. Soon someone will find the courage and lead his reckless attack on the unknown enemy. When I planned this operation, I took into consideration several main ideas. Bandits are not accustomed to long action. They can rush someone, sure! But slow and stubborn battles are not typical, they will quickly get bored and start to express their displeasure. Towards whom? The unknown snipers? Nah, they don’t give a fuck… And whatever answer is likely to come in bullet form, and this isn’t something you can argue your way out of! So who else is to blame? Not the bandit himself, obviously. The ataman is the responsible party here!

Since you are in charge here, you think! Decide how we all get out of this shit. The shit we're in because of you, by the way! If they thought clearly, they could ignore me at the base. I could not do much harm. It is possible to make the slaves dig tunnels between all the key points. And walk underground, no sniper will be able to do anything. Food and all kinds of drinks—there's two full warehouses. You couldn't eat it all in a year! There is no real need to leave the confines of the fence. But... Then someone else will empty the apartments they were yet to gut and take everything that the bandits already considered their own!

And another thing I'm sure Makar's thinking through is how holing up at the base would affect his power among his crew. Other powerful bosses working hard, earning their authority, position… and here you are, boozing and eating well. Who can respect a boss like that? Makar could give the order to break through. And what would I do with three or four dozen gangsters coming at me? Well, five or six people would be dead, but the rest will get to my position. And then I'm fucked!

Gavrish would not have hesitated. He would give the command, and be first in line himself. If he survives, he's the boss! And no one would doubt it. But Makar is not that type.

Gavrish is a gangster. Well... almost a gangster. But definitely not a street punk. Hard, resolute. Blood, both his own or that of a stranger, does not scare him. Ready to spill it. But Makar is an ordinary burglar, individualist, a loner for life. He got lucky, managed to start a gang. But his thinking remained at the same level. This kind of guy will not stand in front of his boys and lead them in an attack.
The result?

We'll see... But something tells me that one can lose their authority very quickly in such an environment! If the leader engages in negotiations now, he'll lose face unambiguously and immediately. His assistants will not understand this. But will he attack himself? I doubt it...

* * *

Makar didn't attack. But he didn't stop others from doing so. I guess I can understand why he didn't prevent the booze spree. Probably even got them drunker, like he was generous. When about fifteen gangsters ran out of the gates, shooting every which way, I did not give away my position with useless shooting. I'm not a good enough sniper to hit a running man. It was clear where they would run. The place where the conversation with the parliamentary took place is one. The water barrel is two. There is obviously not enough men to look through every house around here. That's why I'm going to grab my crap and my rifle and run. Encouraging themselves with shooting and swearing, the bandits reached the barrel. Immediately some of them started pushing it towards the gate.

The rest ran to the place where the conversation with the parliamentarian happened. Somewhere there should be one of these villains, they thought. Somewhere in the staircase or window of the first floor, otherwise the whisper couldn't be heard. They learned they were right, someone was there before. Because he left an unpleasant surprise on his way out! Having learned from their bitter experience, the gangsters did not run in as a crowd through the entrance. They scattered, got the door in their sights, and only after that they tied the rope to the door handle and pulled hard. Why? In all the films SWAT always does that! The door slammed against the wall, there were no grenades on it. But there was a thin string… which pulled on something inside. And from the roof over the entrance a grenade fell. Apparently, due to great greed, the former owner tied it to some piece of metal with a wire, so it wouldn't fall to the ground. But this string didn't stop the grenade from blowing up! And since most of the bandits were lying on the ground, the grenade went off over their heads.
In short, it hit a lot of people.

However, it was not fatal. Which wasn't any better for them. The survivors, reasonably assessing their own strength, did not drag anyone off to the base. And no one went in the entrance to the building, you never know if there's anything else nasty there. They dragged their injured comrades to the side constantly looking around. Someone even got bandaged, as if the

bandages could help. And they didn't have enough for everyone, no one really carried this kind of stuff with them. An extra pack of cigarettes will always come in handy, but bandages... what's the fucking use? Makar's henchmen did not take parts in fights. One of the survivors hurried to the base, to bring slaves to carry the wounded. I suppose dragging someone is beneath him? Laziness is not always the best call! However, not everyone understands this, and it usually takes a while. But in this case, fate made an exception to the rules—right near the gate the gangster caught his very own bullet. Not fatal, but he could no longer walk. And the comrades who pushed the water transport inside reasonably thought their mission was over, none of them wanted to come out under sniper fire. After all he wasn't alone outside, was he? So let his friends help!

By the time the people sitting behind the gates figured out that help was needed by more than this one dude, it was hopelessly late for some of the victims.

Well, let's take stock of the day. The gangsters, having lost three permanently, and acquiring about the same number of wounded, triumphantly fought back and got the water transport. No losses were inflicted on the enemy, due to the lack of presence of any enemies anywhere they could see. Well, if that's a victory, then I'm the Pope! And it's not night yet! The last word is yet to be said. I don't know what Makar said to his army, but he inspired them a little. Which unavoidably affected the general mood. Joyful laughter could even be heard from my position. Well, good luck… I'll wait. I'm in no hurry. And there are no reasons to be sad. On the contrary, the enemy has lost almost ten people, and about the same, if not more, are wounded. And there are no losses on my part. Moreover, I now have a small time lag, which I will use to my advantage. I hide the surplus equipment in a good spot and leave for my house.

Chapter 7

“That’s it?” Yurets raises an eyebrow. “Nothing more?”

“No. This is enough for the customer. I am paying, as we agreed, per head. You can figure out your partner’s pay yourself.”

The sniper looks questioningly at the Ataman. Gavrish nods confidently.

“Well, since the boss don't mind...” Gruzny shrugs.

After the door closes behind the sniper, I place a radio station and a charger on the table.

“It is tuned. Twice a day, at ten in the morning and at ten in the evening, turn it on for twenty minutes. They will ask for Tramp—that’s you.”

“And who will ask?”

“Predator ... who else? I may be very busy, and some issues are urgent.”

A sheet of paper appears on the table.

“Here are descriptions of caches. Remember and do not show it to anyone! There may be instructions, an advance payment or something else, I don’t know. You will be told a cache number and nothing else. If something is not clear, then your question is transmitted the same way. You get in touch, say your call sign and cache number. You should get receipt confirmation.”

The ataman confidently nods and asks a few more questions. I hope my answers were exhaustive.

The recovery of the water wagon was celebrated by Makar with a hell of a party. On this occasion, vodka and reinforced rations were handed out from the warehouse. The cooks were ordered to do whatever they fuck

they wanted, but to feed the people better. And they did their best. The unknown snipers didn't show themselves, and this was an extra reason for boasting. Scared them away! Even the slaves got something from the master's table.

On the other hand, the ataman understood that, strictly speaking, there was no victory. The enemy simply left, not wanting to take up close battle. Well, Makar drew his conclusions. Tomorrow, he'll set up secret hideouts on even distant approaches! That way no other sniper could pull this crap off! The smart move would be to do it today… but the leader had a clear understanding of the fighting capabilities of his army and therefore did not give any orders. You should order only when there is confidence in the execution of the assigned task. And in terms of that the bandits were lacking... Make someone go out into the night, outside the gate? Yeah, right, they'll go easily... Well, it will be morning, then we'll see.

* * *

But in the morning a new problem suddenly arose, and there was no time for setting up secret hideouts. All the ataman's troops, including slaves, were suddenly struck by a bout of strong diarrhea! Whether the cooks were to blame for this, or there were other reasons, purely military needs were abruptly relegated to the background. The crowd, not excluding the leader himself, rushed in unison to the outhouses. And here I need to make a small digression. Among the henchmen of the ataman there was, at least at one point, people who thought ahead and organized the construction of toilets in the backyard. Primitive, basically a hole, but they got the job done. A hundred people gathered in a relatively small place can quickly and cover the whole thing with shit, and it would be very, very uncomfortable to live there. These outhouses solved this issue.
Before…

The first poor soul heading for the coveted building took a bullet in the leg, and suddenly a much more pressing issue than shitting arose.

This time the sniper was firing from far away, even the sound of the shot

didn't reach the base at once. But the accuracy of the fire was not affected. He always made the shot. And he was firing at everyone—a woman from among the Makar's "girlfriends" was the third to be shot down. When on the approaches to the toilets the fifth person fell, this time killed on the spot, people rushed everywhere. No time to think about the aesthetics! It became uncomfortable to breathe… The enraged gangsters rushed out of the gate, and there they lost two more — yesterday's shooter did not go anywhere. Yes, only one was killed, but this did not make the situation any easier. The exit was still blocked.

Assault rifles rumbled in the kitchen, that's the cooks being sentenced. It became impossible to move around the territory at all, snipers were able to get them in even the most secluded corners. By noon the bandits totaled five dead on the spot, eight injured. They made the slaves go out to put plywood shields on the barbed wire. This is how Makar hoped to obstruct the view for whoever was keeping the whole courtyard under fire, not allowing anyone to go to the toilets. He managed to land hits in other places, taking out people even through the windows of the barracks. Without blinking an eye, the sniper switched to slaves and four more lay dead. Abandoning the work, the remaining people darted every which way.

Eighteen combat-ready warriors were left in the ranks of Makar's army…

* * *

"You owe me for fourteen dead." Gruzny regretfully sets aside an empty beer can.

"No problemo!" I nod in agreement. "How do you prefer your payment? Money or some other way?"

"Money ... two thousand per head, as agreed."

I give him a note.

"The trader will issue it to you, we have a corresponding agreement. Questions?"

Yurets opens the second can.

“Yeah, I got one... You, as I can see, are not a simple guy…”

“I’m not too complicated. For loved ones I’m absolutely trouble-free.”

“Do you often have jobs like this?”

“Not too often. But ... let's say, it happens sometimes.”

“Well, if we come to an agreement with you ... then the price may be a little different. You're getting a cut, right?”

“Sure. But I work too.”

“I saw that. I can’t say that you worked like a professional, but for the first time it’s fine. For a country boy.”

“I’m not a sniper in any shape or form! The command arrived urgently, our guys did not have time to pull up…”
“That’s what I’m saying! Maybe next time, no one will need to pull up, eh? We'll manage on our own…”

“Sounds reasonable! I will pass it on!”

“Yup,” nods the shooter “And I’ll reciprocate in kind.”

He leaves, and I return to my place. I have three ambush locations here now, and I constantly move between them. But there’s nothing happening at the bandit base, so I have some time to have a snack and think. My laxative idea turned out to be even more effective than I thought. There are many drug stores in the city. True, most of them have already been looted, so finding even a bandage isn’t easy. But the laxatives weren’t of particular interest to anyone. At least I found them quickly enough. I tore open several packages and poured everything straight into the tank. During the

night this stuff mixed in with the water, and while the water tank was moved, the contents were repeatedly shaken. No idea what the dose ended up being, but I saw the effect with my own eyes. The people were seriously shaken, they even forgot about self-preservation. If I was trying to kill as many bandits as possible I would have had a lot of success. But I had Yurets for that, he has absolutely no remorse towards them.

Of course I can't take the base by storm, even with the help of Gavrish's people. The defenses are still well thought out, and losses can't be avoided. And Makar can spend a long time under siege. There is enough food and equipment.

Go for a breakthrough... While under sniper fire?

Doubtful…

No, the bandits aren't that stupid yet. Theywould still have to make it to the building. Three hundred meters in a relatively open area. How many people would they lose? I optimistically estimate the current losses of the besieged people at twenty-five or thirty, including, of course, the wounded. All in all, there were a little less than fifty people left. And how many people can Makar send to storm the positions? Someone has to protect the base! The slaves... there were about thirty of them. No matter how you think about it, no more than ten would storm out. I wonder how soon they will realize that they can't drink the water?

In any case, I already have a plan for the evening. Makar won't give up the base under any circumstances. For him, it would mean the end of everything. So they will sit there until the last possible moment. And he certainly won't stand guard. Instead, he'll barricade himself in his "mansion." He's not alone, five or six people are always with him. Let's assume that they are all alive. So, six or seven people can be easily discounted, they won't go outside. They'll guard the chief. There are three posts at the base, all for two people. But is everyone in fighting shape there now? Someone has to relieve the sentries, patrol the territory... Yurets also set up the night optics, now darkness will not hinder me. I can compensate

for my inexperience with accurate shooting over long distances by shortening the distance. None of the guards would risk turning on the lights, Yurets has already taught the bandits to not draw any attention.

Of course the participation of such a specialist would help me a lot in my situation. Fuck, he would have solved all the problems I face! But... he would inevitably spill the beans somewhere—hey, I'm responsible for all these bodies, he'd say! And where is my achievement in that case? That's right, there isn't one. You wanna live, don't whine and don't complain! And if you want to live well, that's even more true! With your own hands and feet, dear! Work!

Chapter 8

Frankly, crawling two hundred meters on your belly isn't fun. I would even say it's quite the opposite. But somehow, with foul language in my heart, I still got to the point I chose in advance. The information I gathered while being chained in the yard wasn't just the layout of the base, by the way. I also managed to figure out the approaches. Sure, on one side of the base only. But now I look at the same buildings from the other side and I know stuff! I understand that there is a dead zone behind that hillock, and here is a scour, where I can crawl... Anyone can benefit from any unpleasant experience. Sure, not everyone can apply this knowledge, but that's life! It's a tricky thing... Looking through the night sight is fun! During the day everything looks quite different. And there is also a fun feature where you turn on the backlight and many ordinary objects start to glow! I've read about this before, these are the tricks of an infrared illuminator. But reading is one thing, seeing for yourself is another... What am I on about? When I was "working" as a guard dog, I saw how the jackets and other outside clothes of the bandits were washed. Nothing special. Trough, water, washing powder. This information was deposited somewhere in the back of my mind, just in case. When I was at home, before going to the shopkeeper after breaking out, I took off my old clothes to change. I decided to wash the dirty clothes. The powder I had turned out to be the same as the one used by the Makarov slaves. So I washed my pants, dried them. And as I was testing the night-vision device before going out, I realized that the trousers stood out. I looked at my jacket, everything was normal, there were no stains. And no glow. I grew interested, wetted my sleeve, powdered it with the washing powder, rinsed and hung to dry. And after a couple of hours saw the same thing! Is there something wrong with this powder ... or do you just need to rinse it better? Remembering the laundresses of the bandits, I grin. I did not observe much effort…

Now we'll check this in practice!

The first shift change is at one in the morning. At least that used to be the case.

I lie and look…

I noticed the glowing spot even before I saw people coming from the depths of the courtyard. When they got close, it became clear that a bandit's pants were glowing. Safe to assume they weren't washed that long ago... The new shift didn't really hide, at night nobody shot at them. And there was no light there. Well, it's about a hundred meters, maybe a bit more. They walk slowly, in a fairly straight line. The crosshairs were on the chest of the guard out in front.

My finger even cramped!

But I'll wait …

A door opened, these were the guards coming out to meet the new shift. They spoke briefly about something, threw their weapons on their backs and went to bed. Well, they finished their shift, they have the right. When they disappeared from sight, I shifted my attention to the guard booth. The bandits drew some conclusions from the situation, because the front wall of the booth was lined with sandbags. A bullet, even from a rifle, will not pierce it. So they have some shelter. But, lazy as ever, Makarov's henchmen covered the front wall with bags, but that's all they did. I fully understood their logic. They were shot at from one direction the whole time, right? Well, that's the direction they covered. To shoot at the door you need to get there from the side, and during the day, guards would notice. And of course no one dared to think an intruder like that would live to tell the tale. And no one tried to get in through there. Someone tried to leave in that direction, sure, even successfully. But not in.

Shift more to the right, right up to the wall. If it all goes to shit I won't be leaving here! But the gamble has already gripped me! It feels like my hearing and other senses are extremely sharpened. The rifle goes on the ground, and from my holster (one I sewed on myself, since the coat the policemen used to own with the nice holster is probably currently being worn by one of the bandits) a pistol appears. Several movements, and the silencer is installed. It's good that I didn't sell this stuff to the merchant back

then! Like I knew I'd need it... The cartridge has been in the barrel for ages, I'm careful to control for that.

Guard booth, a two and a half by two meters construction. At the back wall is a couch. I'd bet money someone has already settled on it. The wall is solid, there are no windows, and behind it is a warehouse. There are windows on the front wall and on the right. On the left, only a window in the door, smaller than the others. But the approach is not very convenient either, the wall of the warehouse gets in the way. So there is no need for the guards to even look out there.

Where are the guards now?

Looking out the window?

Well, one is, I'm sure. In any case, when they were changing shifts before, one of them always looked sleepy. So he had his honest sleep right up to the moment the new shift came in. In the movies, the hero would throw a stone, then he would kill the guards who jumped out at the sound with a knife. Hell, he would just be able to beat them to death with his fists, it's a movie after all! For some reason I strongly doubt that someone would jump out if I threw a rock. They'd start shooting right out of the window. But I'm not going to experiment to see whether cinema stunts are compatible with reality, there is no need for that. Everything is much simpler. A characteristic ... hmm ... smell tells me that the water from the barrel is still used for its intended purpose. And this entails some specific disadvantages for the guards. Simply put, the guards do not really go that far from their post. Gross, sure, but there's always a risk they won't be able to hold it in. So we wait…

Half an hour has passed, or more, can't say, didn't look at my watch. If you look at the luminous face, you lose your night vision, and then you have to sit and get used to the darkness again. No problem, I'm in no hurry. In the booth there was some noise, the lock clanked and the door swung open.

Damn!

In the dark doorway I can't see anything! There is no light inside!

My mistake... I didn't think that the people would be frightened by now and wouldn't light their lanterns. It used to be that they would walk around like they're on display, and each time they considered it their duty to illuminate the person sitting on the chain. It's an extra laugh for them, and I only had to sit there blinking my eyes after that. But I have night vision goggles! I forgot, I'm not used to such benefits of civilization. I move the eyepiece of the night vision device to my eye, push the button... And in the greenish glow of the screen I see a human figure heading in my direction. A little bit more…

No, he stops. Crouches. A quick look at the door, it's closed. There is a chance that the second guard isn't sleeping. Okay, I waited for a while, I'll wait a bit more. Having finished his duty, the cheerful bandit gets up and, fastening his trousers as he goes, heads for the booth. Pounds twice on the door with his fist. Lock clanks. And in the doorway there is no one! The door opens outward, so where could the second thug be? Why he's laying on the bed! Only needs to stretch out his hand and there's the door lock.

Bang!

The returning guard is thrown aside, he clutches his hands on the doorway, trying not to fall. In the meantime I move the barrel to the right, that where the bed should be. Ptew, ptew! Each time, I shift the barrel a few inches to the side to increase my chance of hitting him. Jump to the left, I fall on my knee, ptew, ptew! The first gangster begins to stir, well, my dear, I have some for you too! The bolt freezes in the rear position, that's all the ammunition. Magazine! Where is the spare magazine?! In my pocket, motherfucker! What a dumbass! I should have thought of something in case this happened!

I speed up, the magazine doesn't immediately go into the gun… Got it! Hastily, I press the slide stop and the bolt smacks into place. Okay, I can shoot... But I don't hear any return fire, only a gurgling sound coming from

the booth. I rise from my knee, run off to the side, and look into the window. On the floor the second guard is convulsing. I do not know where I got him, but he is still alive! Trying to scream, but nothing comes of it.

And it will not!

Raise the pistol.

Shots clap, muffled, and the guard freezes on the floor — dead.

Yes, he was injured, and I just finished him. So what?

I don't feel any remorse. None at all.

He is the enemy.

The enemy is deadly and ruthless.

No one on this base deserves leniency, no one at all! You have a chance to kill your enemy, even in the most inhumane way, you kill him. Or he, never hesitating, will kill you. And in an arbitrarily cruel way. No pangs of repentance will visit him, I have seen that.

So no need to wax poetic.

What do we have here?

Assault rifle, the well-known Ksukha, AKS-74U. Three magazines... that'll work! Grenade, just one? Well, I'll leave it to lie on the table, I have some ideas for it…

Sawed off, a regular shotgun. Screw it, I got a lot of stuff to carry without it. But I do pick up the cartridges, 12 caliber, they'll come in handy. The rest isn't of significant interest. I remember they had empty bottles here... yeah! Found it under the bunk. I break the bottle against the corner of the table.

Crack!

And now I have in my hands the notorious bottle shank. Like I'm a character in a gangster action movie.

Only I am not planning to cut anyone with it. Quickly unscrew the fuse from the grenade. Big props to Ivan, he taught me something in his time! And in my pocket I have some thread... I tie the fuse with them and place it back. The shank goes under the bed, the grenade goes into it, we will use that stick there too... Good? Okay... and the trigger lever is pressed against the glass, it will not fly off if the pin is pulled out. Awesome!

I tie the thread to the foot of the bandit lying on the floor.

In the movies I've seen more than once how some extremely clever men hide a riveted grenade under the body of an enemy. So when someone turns them over it'll go off, bang! But I suppose I wasn't the only one that saw these movies. I doubt that in addition to the diarrhea the bandits were stricken with Alzheimer'stoo. They will not just roll the corpse. They'll try to check carefully. Or at least use their hand to look under the body, is there something hidden there or not? And there is nothing. No surprises. They won't just leave the body at the booth, the corpse will just be dragged away somewhere. Yeah, and following closely behind will be the grenade, dragged out from under the bed.

You do you, guys, carry him off.

Now in a movie, the brave hero would at this moment head inside the base, gunning down everyone in his path. But I am a normal, albeit very vindictive, person. And we're not filming, there is no next take. So... fuck that noise, I'll take my time. No matter how many clever books I read, everything strongly advises not to relax during retreat. So many people have already been burned by their own incompetence, it's hard to comprehend! How you came in is how you should leave. Carefully, with due attention! I follow the recommendation. It must have been some fairly smart people, the writers of these books, since they lived to actually have a

chance to write a book. I relax only when I'm sufficiently far away from the base.

The smart thing to do would be to watch them all night so that they don't run away. But Makar and his followers have nowhere to run. All their interests are here, outside this place they have no influence. Even merchants are interested in them only as long as they are able to supply them with goods for exchange. No slaves or goods - hit the road, Jack! The ataman is greedy, he does not want to allow anyone into his business, that's why he doesn't have any allies on the outside. It is difficult to actually take the base, but no one is trying. How long will they be able to stay there, with a bunch of wounded, under continuous fire?

I doubt that that it'll be long…
Again, they have nothing to drink. Makar will not give slaves beer and vodka to drink. Drinking from time to time is actually pretty good for you. But drinking alcohol constantly, instead of water. There can be a whole range of consequences!

With these thoughts I fall asleep.

* * *

The changing shift did not see the guards coming out to meet them. And when they reached the booth they found broken windows and holes in the walls. Thin sheet metal was not a hindrance for bullets. Prudently not engaging in the search while it's dark, the couple of guards moved away and took up defence behind the nearest shelter. Whether there is someone in the booth that's alive or not, they didn't give a fuck! When it's dawn, then we'll see! One of the guards ran back and alerted all the other bandits. Of course no one even thought about turning on the lights, they're not that dumb! So until the morning they sat in ambush, but no one came.

In the light of the day it became possible to see everything in more detail. The guards were somehow shot, and yet no one heard a single bang! Well, they've heard about silencers, so that wasn't much of a surprise. Kolka

Zherday's assault rifle is gone. Well, of course, who'd leave such a trophy? And the rest... also nothing new or unusual. Makar, who by the morning was in a very nasty mood, ordered them to carry the bodies out from the booth and look out! They came at night, and the bitches could somehow get close during the day, now they know the path! He chose not to mention the fact that no special knowledge was required to do any of this.

They dragged the body of Zherday out to the street, and now for the partner…

BANG! The booth's entire wall blown off, along with the door. And as a guard booth it instantly ceased to be of any value. Along the way, the fragments hit two more bandits. Not fatally, but they were out of service. The bodies of the dead guards were left behind, no time for them! Lucky if the living get away…

* * *

The issue of building a new guard postsuddenly became very urgent. They did not overthink. They woke up the slaves, roughed them up and then forced them to make new sandbags. For this purpose they dug a hole right in the hangar, you couldn't see it from outside. There were not enough sacks, so jackets and shirts were brought in from the warehouse. Button them up, tie the sleeves and the collar, how is it any different from a bag? In the warehouses they broke down the walls between them, the number of those that wanted to go out in the open was dramatically reduced. And along the way grabbed something for themselves. The women began to whine and make trouble, frightened by the nightmare that was happening all around them. They got punched in the mouth too. Enough already with the whining! One of them, who, as a force of habit, got loud, was simply shot on the spot. And Makar did not say anything... Discipline, far from the mark as it was, was plummeting. Finally there was about fifty improvised bags, so it was possible to start. The gates of the hangar swung open, and a chain of slaves with bags on their shoulders barely started to trickle out. There was not much swagger in their step, they drank from the same water barrel after all.

They made it quickly enough to the location indicated by the ataman. They threw the sandbags on the ground and a few left to get more. Three of them started laying out the fortification wall. And right away they stopped when one of them grabbed his shot shoulder. Nobody heard the shot. After another builder fell to the ground with a bullet in his hip, work stopped completely. The third slave leaped like a rabbit towards the gate and rushed in the direction of the houses. He didn't get there though, several guns fired at once from the base. After that the sniper shifted his focus to the bandits. He kept silent for a while and then suddenly fired several bullets right into the wall of one of the barracks. The place didn't look special from the outside so it was hard to understand the logic behind the shots. But inside things were much worse! The place where the bullets hit was the very same place the base dwellers made the hole in the wall so that they wouldn't have to go out in the open.

The result is another wounded bandit. And wounded pretty badly. So the shooter was well aware of the layout of the base? Well, considering the chain passed on with the parliamentarians at the very beginning of the confrontation, that was no surprise. However, the situation had become critical. The discontent among the gang members was supercharged. There were just over a dozen people left in the ranks including the leader. And something needed to be done with the slaves. Their value under the circumstances wasn't clear, they were of no use, many of them wounded and demanding at least superfluous attention. Having locked the door of the barracks, they threw in a few bandages, some medicine, and other low-value garbage. This solved the problem for a bit, but do you do with them later? They couldn't work on base protection, snipers had clear shots at all key points. None of the slaves were going to risk their lives. And even the beatings weren't persuasive, it's still better than lying on the floor with a bullet in the leg. And no help in sight. Two wounded bandits had already died, and the slaves that buried them understood that if no one could help the bandits, slaves didn't stand a chance.

Makar gathered the most trusted people for a meeting. Well, the two that were still on their feet.

The leader asked bluntly: “What are we going to do?”
“We should talk to these…” One of the bandits invited to the meeting spoke up.
The ataman scoffed and glanced into the corner where the chain was.

“They’ve already stated their intentions! You wanna to leave here bare ass broke? No chance they let you carry away anything valuable! Three days ago there was still room for some moves, but now? I'm afraid their current conditions would be much less pleasant! Don’t you understand, they wanna have this place to themselves! We toiled and built this with our hands, and they wanna just scoop it up! All the spoils without the work. They don’t fucking need you, or me, or any of us!”

Well, Makar pushed it by saying they built anything with their hands. But there were no objections — everybody here were cut of the same cloth.

“These assholes…” The second thug nodded his head towards the slave barracks. “We gotta do something! They’re out of control, utterly! Speaking back. We even had to kill one of them!”

The leader replied, “That’s not a problem at all! The real issue is getting out.”

The result of the meeting was that one of the bandits immediately went towards the barracks, where the slaves were kept. The trouble was that for safety reasons (so no one escaped from there quietly), the building was at somewhat of a distance and there were no buildings nearby. And those that once stood were demolished at the direct order of the ataman. So farsnipers hadn’t fired shots at this part of the base. The slaves were fired at only when they tried to fix or build something on the base. The rest of the time they were of no interest to anyone. The doors of the barracks were locked and for extra security they had a wire going through the holes for the padlock. Nobody remembered where the lock was. Upon approaching the bandit smacked the door several times with his fist.

“Hey! C’mon, you bums, out!”

Inside there were footsteps and other noises.

With a smirk the bandit pulled a couple of grenades out of his pocket, tore out the pins and threw the grenades into the small window above the door. Normally it was just for ventilation, but now... He stepped aside and hid behind a pole so shrapnel wouldn't hit him.

When something blew up at the base I dropped my tin can in surprise! Shit, what is happening over there? I look through the scope... Smoke rises above the roof of the slave barracks, and there's some movement near the gate. And more specifically? Well, a man with an assault rifle, definitely not a slave! Why is he hiding behind the pole? I don't think there were any shots, so why is he hiding? However, what difference does it make to me? A bandit? Yep. So he's a target! As Yurets told me: "A sniper has no emotions!" Well, I am not a sniper, but I'm getting there! The rifle pushes into my shoulder in a familiar way. That's it, nobody is hiding from anything anymore. After half an hour a man with a white flag appears at the gate.

"We want to leave." A bandit is sitting on the sand, with his back to me. He doesn't turn his head, so his words are a little hard to understand.

"That's it? You guys were given a chain, what's happening with that?"

"He's hurt, he can't walk. And the bullet grazed his head. It's quite a picture... We'll leave him outside. If you want we can even use the same chain."

"There's a pole near the slave barracks, tie him up there. We see his face, then you can leave."

"But not with empty hands, c'mon!" The parliamentarian reacts emotionally.

"Fuck it, take as much as you can carry. And forget about this place!"

“Good!” The bandit agrees suspiciously quickly.

“Tomorrow afternoon, no later than two pm, Makar must be on the chain. When we see him there, we’ll let you know. And in an hour you can leave.”

“Yeah, I get it, I get it!”

Chapter 9

“Predator calling Tramp! Answer!”

“Yeah, I’m here!”

“Number two. You copy?”

“Got it, number two.”

“Contact in three hours. Confirm receipt.” I turn off the radio and put it aside.

Did the bandits decide to play their own game? You are welcome to do so, but who told you that I would play by your rules? In three hours we have a new session. Gavrish confirms the receipt of the task. We agree on call signs for his group and say goodbye till the next communication. Well, that's good… now we can play! That's why I moved the exit from the base till tomorrow, right after today's session with my bandits. Yeah, yeah, with my own bandits! And I’m not any better, so I shouldn’t pretend otherwise.

At night someone decided to crawl out of the base quietly. With little noise and no unnecessary movements. The dude crawled applying real effort, looking for holes and hiding behind bushes. Almost got to the nearest house, and at that moment another one crawled out. That’s a bummer, I thought I'd let him get further away, though that isn’t too smart. He might not leave. I didn’t leave due to my newly acquired vindictiveness. I stayed to torture my enemies in every possible way. It may be that this comrade has similar deviations… So let's not risk it! Upon hearing his buddy’s yelling the second thug didn't risk his head and turns towards the gate. However, it did not help him much. The distance isn’t much, about a hundred meters. He could be seen quite well through the night sights. However, he is not visible anymore, only a leg sticking out from behind a heap of garbage. The third shot finally lands, but it does not stir any emotions in the victim. Well, only an actual dead man can pretend to be dead so well… So after the show

I put my rifle aside, hang my tried-and-tested assault rifle on my shoulder and carefully sneak in the direction of the former guardhouse. There are no guards there anymore, too scary. We have to assume that the people are sitting inside somewhere. And I even have an idea where they are.

Morning did not bring any surprises for the bandits. The snipers were silent, apparently deciding that the night lesson was more than enough. However, no one risked going out into the open. The group quickly prepared for exit, checked their weapons, replenished ammunition...

What a fucking smell! Fucking hell…

And the setting overall... is also... let's say consistent with the smell.

Okay, I'm not a squeamish person. I knew from the sounds that feverish preparations are underway somewhere nearby. People were moving around, something was being dragged, someone cursing... In short, everything was in line with an emergency evacuation. From the outside. But there was no sense of turmoil which usually accompanies such things. I remember the usual move to a new office — approximately like a fire burning during a flood. And here... Nobody yelling, trying to drive elementary concepts into the stupid heads of the people carrying out the tasks. No sound of the excuses of an unreasonable dumbass. It seems that the people are implementing a certain pre-approved plan of action. Which is suspicious in itself! There aren't any people smart enough here to have a plan. And besides, since we have agreed on everything, why did two of them crawl out of the gate at night? What, they couldn't leave in the morning? Or are they so against going with everyone else? Doesn't look like it. And they were leaving light, without a load, just with weapons. It wasn't much like they were running away, instead it seemed like they were scouting. Okay, the first one didn't make it... but they couldn't see that from the gate, it was dark after all. But the death of the second one logically should have caused some reaction. But nothing happened. I don't know how I would have acted in Makar's place, but I certainly wouldn't have stayed idle. I don't think he didn't notice two people missing. And yet, there was silence about the two dead. However, this does not affect my

plans in any way. I'm still sitting, or rather lying, in wait.

* * *

The voices behind the wall became quieter and people apparently began to prepare to exit and move. Well, that's understandable. Behind the wall there's a clothes warehouse. If they will take something valuable with them, it'll be weapons and food, a bunch of rags are obviously not needed.

Whoa!

Something creaked in the depths of the room!

I look around and climb under the bunkers, it's dark and I can't be seen.

I forgot to say that I am lying in the slave barracks at the moment. There are dead bodies everywhere, yesterday's slaves. Most of them died from the grenade explosions, shrapnel holes are clearly visible on the walls. But some of them were killed later with point-blank shots. Which means several grenades were thrown through the ventilation windows and then they entered and finished off the survivors. So that's how they wrote off the problem. I can't say that I didn't foresee something like this, but I didn't expect such final solutions. From my point of view it would have been easier to throw them out, there is no need to feed them and no one needs treatment. I've never really seen such cruelty before. Since the slaves were not allowed to use the toilet the smell in the barracks was appropriate. And there is something else that smelled distinctly.

But what was the creaking noise?

There are no doors in that wall, and...

Suddenly a fresh breeze appeared and a ray of light flashed on the wall. A lantern? No, that's something else...

Daylight?

From where?

There was muffled swearing and a bandit with an assault rifle came into view. Another one, similarly armed. So!
“I don't see shit! The door is locked! And we can't open it yet.”
“You can cut a hole in the wall!”
“That's true.”
Something was grinding again.
“Well... now we can see better!”
“Give me the scissors! I'll build something for myself too!”

* * *

Okay, I see. These two came here to be the chief's safety net. And they sneaked into the barracks just like I did, through a hole cut through in the sheet metal wall. But I cut it with a knife, while they used metal scissors. Anticipating potential complications, I made my hole in one of the empty rooms, the former pantry. Most of the room was occupied by some shelves, and it was absolutely impossible to lie down there. That's why nobody ever slept there.

Recently, the slave barracks had no one coming in, which is why I assumed that its inhabitants were transferred to some other place. Otherwise someone would have brought food and water. But for two days nobody approached it with anything like that. And I had every reason to believe that the slaves were locked up somewhere else. So I didn't make a hole right away. I was lying under the wall for half an hour, listening. When a dozen or so people are sleeping in the same room, there simply can't be any dead silence. Someone will breathe or sigh. And there are wounded too, they’re restless people, don’t sleep well.

But it was quiet inside.

Only after I got inside did I understand the reason for the silence.

So, Makar will be brought to the pole. And they will put him on the chain as I demanded. So that his face could be seen in through the scope. The sniper will see the leader chained, give that information to the commander, and the people will be allowed to pass without a shot. Mm-hmm... and if we take into account that the bandits are counting on at least one of the night crawlers out there waiting for them.

And then...

It's hard to say what happens after a bunch of armed bandits leave the base unhindered. One thing is clear, it does not bode well for me.

So we wait.

They will bring him in, leave him here.

They will wait for some time for the message to reach the commander. And then they will leave for the exit. And if someone comes up to humiliate the gangster with a spit in the face, then two extremely unpleasant surprises await this person. Surprises with assault rifles. Well, well... the idea isn't too bad, but I guarantee you guys will have some issues with its implementation. Hopefully fatal issues.

Meanwhile, outside there were footsteps, something clanked. Attaching the chain to the pole? Possible. And there was some kind of ruckus at the front door now.

"Hey, guys!" That's someone new, it looks like he came up from the street.

"Well?"
"All good! I did everything as agreed. The lock hangs on one hinge, so you can open the door without any problems."

“Fucking awesome!”

Footsteps receded.

So, I must assume that Makar has already taken his place at the pole.

And I have to tip my hat to the leader, he took the chance! He acted as live bait, luring the enemy with himself. And it’s understandable. We must assume the bandits have already realized that only a few people are working against them. And one of them has a personal beef with the leader. If that’s true, and considering the requirement to put the ataman on the chain, then this person may very well come here in order to humiliate Makar as much as possible and personally spit in his face. In the meantime, the bandits who exited from the gates attack the enemy from the rear, reducing the distance as much as possible, nullifying the advantage of the snipers. In close combat the sniper rifle is significantly inferior to a shotgun. The night creeps, I suppose, had the task of identifying the shooters’ positions. Or something similar. Five minutes passed since the conversation between the bandits. The main group is presumably ready to leave and there’s a good hundred meters to them from the slave barrack. They will not hear… Carefully place the assault rifle on the ground and bend to the side, holding the gun at the ready. So where are you hiding?

Here he is, the first dude.

He pulled up a mattress to the hole, folded it and sat down comfortably.

And the second dude? Judging by the voice, he should be somewhere further away, but I can’t see him. Well, yes, the view is far from royal from under the bunkbeds... I must get out. And carefully, alternately moving my arms and legs, I begin to move forward. I look at the floor, selecting areas free from debris and other crap. Your arms and legs shouldn’t be anything that can make any noise. You can’t touch anything!

A meter ... another one ... almost a minute to do that.

Another meter.

I see the head of the first gangster. Seductive target, but not for me, I'm not such an accurate shooter.

Two meters …

I can turn around.
I squat down, let my overworked hands stop buzzing, I was crawling on all fours!

Weapons at the ready, lift… slowly! No hurry!

There is the first dude, I see him almost fully.

Where is the second?!

Here he is… through the ajar inner door I can see part of his back. So, the inner door is plastic on an aluminum frame, for bullets it's not much of a barrier. But it is a barrier for the eyes, so it is pertinent to not allow the bandit to hide behind it. He is quite capable of shooting something through the door, he has an assault rifle! While all the attention of the bandits is turned to the street, they watch for the appearance of a possible enemy. No, guys, you're looking in the wrong direction! I try not to look directly at them, somewhere I read that a person is able to feel an unkind gaze.
All right, my arms are steady again.

There's been a bullet in the barrel for a while, the magazine is full!

I raise my gun and shoot at the dude further away, the one partially obscured by the door. I don't try to target a visible part of the body, I shoot right through the door! There's nothing there to stop a bullet, I remember that well! I'm familiar with the layout of the barracks, I've spent many days here… Quiet claps of shots and the bandit falls on his side. The first one, hearing the claps, jumps up and turns around. And he gets a bullet in his belly. I don't want to take any chances and shoot where it's easier to hit.

Yes, a headshot is more effective, but you're way more likely to miss. I leap to the side and the bandit drops the assault rifle. From this position I can see the second dude better. Dead or alive, he gets another bullet too. I don't want to take any chances... And I don't need to anymore, my opponents are done. Nobody is moving. But I still perform a control shot.

There are still cartridges in the magazine, but I decide to reload. I pick up my assault rifle and go deep into the room, away from the front door. I take out my radio, then turn down the volume and activate the transmitter.

"This is number 2, calling Crow!"
"This is Crow,"the other party replies.
"Guests leaving the compound."
"Visual confirmed."
"Their things are yours. They serve no purpose. All of them."
"But," my interlocutor stutters. "There's…"
"I repeat, all of them! Awaiting your message confirming execution."
"Clear."

Yes, I understand the confusion of the person on the other end of the line. It is likely that there are also Makar's women among the bandits. And this is a little hard for the people in positions waiting for the order to open fire. Makes them think... and certainly not about how they look.

But I can't risk it!

The whole reputation of the Predator is based solely on rumors and speculation. No one who has seen me on the chain can survive! This can lead to speculation... And the fate of any women who fall into the hands of Gavrish's bandits also isn't pleasant. Their lives would be short and difficult. So it's better to get it over with right away so that they don't suffer for long. Not that they're great people… All right, I am not vindictive enough to think that.

"You should be!" my inner voice comments reproachfully. "God forgives, but it'll get you killed!"

I hang the radio on my belt and quietly climb through the hole made by the bandits.

And here comes Makar!

The chain attached to the post locks on the hoop that once decorated my waist. I don't see any bolts, but I don't doubt that if he needs to, the ataman can throw off the hoop quickly. He is a man capable of foresight, he'll have thought of that. It's about fifteen meters from here to the leader, easy pickings for a skillful shooter! Yep, and where will we find one of those?

But the laser pointer will work great in this situation!

Pa-tew!

The silencer on the assault rifle works quite well, shots do not make much noise. And the collimator sight helped, Makar curses and grabs his leg.

The second leg!

Hmm... the hip...

I kick the door and jump out.

The leader doesn't have time to react right away, the pain from the wounds distracts him from everything around. But still, he has some mind left, stretches out his hand...

"I wouldn't recommend it! I'll cut you in half!"

My assault rifle ominously hangs just three meters from his face, a child wouldn't miss from that distance.

"Hands down!"

He leans back on the pole and puts his hands on the ground.

“You…"
Recognised me, huh?
“Me.”
“Okay... I thought this was something like that.”
“And you weren’t wrong.”

Behind my back shots suddenly sound out, machine guns rattle, shotguns bang. A couple of explosions, hand grenades are being used too.

“Don't get your hopes up, that’s your guys getting caught. As you can see we thought about that too.”

“You motherfucker!” Makar twitches.

But the rifle swings unambiguously right in front of his face, so the ataman restrains himself.

“You think you’re the smartest dude around? Don’t hold your breath for the backup in the barracks, I killed them.”

The ataman licks his lips.

“And what do you want?”

“Nothing now. Your guys will be finished now and you will die of blood loss. If you wanna know, there was just two of us. And the second shooter was here for just one day. You were beaten by one person. So now you can die a complete loser!”

Makar moves in the sand and the rifle fires off several bullets. The leather coat twitches on his right shoulder from the bullets and a pistol falls to the ground. Oh, wow, it’s my gun! The one I picked up back in my building. I kick it to the side, I’ll pick it up later. Makar groans, he’s barely thinking from the pain. Not gonna survive, even I can see that.

The bandit is alive for now, but his strength is draining fast. So I'm not expecting any other nastiness from him. I return to the slave barrack and search the dead ambush squad and pick up their guns. Find a fancy sight on one of the guns and hide it in my backpack right away. I'll visit Sledgehammer when time permits, he'll explain what this thing even is.

"Crow calling number two!" The radio comes alive in my backpack.

"Number two here."

"The client session is over."

"Good. Get to Makar's base, you'll be met."

* * *

Before the bandits get here I look over the leader's home. The stocks of food and booze are great, but I'm not interested in that too much yet. But the safe in the ataman's room… I'm no expert in breaking into these things. But Gavrish has to have a specialist like that. It's safe to bet Makar wasn't stocking whiskey in there, it's definitely worth looting this metal box carefully. And the safe is hidden too, if the ataman wasn't in such a hurry that he forgot to move the cabinet back no one would see that there's a small hole in the wall. And there's a really interesting thing in the hole. A wheel combination lock, I think you have to rotate it a few times. Five, I think. Our head accountant had a similar one. I twist the wheel a few times, sigh and replace the cabinet that hides it. This needs a more experienced master…

I didn't search the warehouses, the bandits are sure to hide some nasty presents there. And I should go to the gate now. Gavrish went all out, the team is about twenty people. In front of the approaching people I see a familiar mug.

Semyon?

One of the most trusted men of Gavrish.

The bandits approached this pretty seriously!

Upon seeing me, Semyon isn't surprised at all.

"Hey!" He waves at me cheerfully.

"Hey to you too. How was work?"

He shifts from one foot to the other, as if shy.

"Great… overall."

"More specific."

"Well, you were right about the women, they're pretty intense!"

I raise my eyebrow in surprise.

"Initially the guys didn't want to kill them. You understand… And it's not like the women were making much of a fuss. As soon as things got intense they hid in the closest building entrance. We didn't shoot at them, just three guys followed them to warn them not to do anything stupid! They're like, sure, got it! And as soon as Volka turned his back to them, the cutest one among them, the blonde with the curves, fired into his back from a pistol. And got him good too. Another two of ours got hit. One didn't make it, yeah…"

"Understood…"

"So the guys didn't go there. They threw in like five grenades. Then they looked, of course. Looted their guns and a decent amount of money. All of them were armed!"

After everything that happened I wouldn't be much surprised if the "cutest

one" was my old love. The blonde with the curves definitely sounds like her! Nina really changed from the old times. And she was always brash. Well, she decided for everyone!

"We took their guns and stuff, and hid the bodies in the basement, they shouldn't be laying around in the street. What's happening here?"

"There isn't any work left, I handled it myself. Check the warehouses and all the rest, there could be surprises!"

Semyon nods. "Typical. We'll look around!"

"Well, let me hand over the place to you. Beware, there are issues with defense, one entrance which is also the exit. So you need to think hard!"

I lead him around the territory showing where and what is located. The fortification specialist does not waste time, immediately giving short orders on the fly. A real master! If Makar had someone like that... I would not be standing here now! Makar, oddly enough, was still alive! Delusional, not recognizing anyone.

"Look at him, the lively bastard." I'm surprised. "Should have finished him off right away!"

"Stop!"

I turn around sharply and grab a bandit that's running past.

"Wait a second, dear."

On his shoulder is a weapon I know well, my shotgun. Dirty and used, but I'd recognize my gun anywhere!

"Where did you get this?"

"In battle, where else?"

“Okay”, I say as I remove the assault rifle from my shoulder. “Wanna switch?”

The bandit doesn’t hesitate, the rifle is obviously more valuable.

“Sure! I can even give you some cartridges…”

“Go for it!”

Thus the last gun I lost here is returned to me, which makes me happy!

After I’ve saddled Semyon with some urgent tasks, I ask for a couple people to help me carry my loot closer to my place. A little surprised by what he’s seen, the head of the group gives me three people. I use this and grab some food and a dozen cognac bottles from the warehouse that the bandits already go into.

I was right, by the way, there was a few traps there…

The next two days I’m move all the equipment and other stuff I’ve taken to my hidden locations. Learning from my mistakes, I’ve made some secret caches. In some places I make a hole in the ventilation shaft and lower a sack of stuff with a rope. In another place, I hide a canvas rollup under some floorboards. I even build a makeshift wall from bricks to hide my cache. It turned out crappy, but I highly doubt that anyone will consider the skills of the unknown builder, no time for that…

I drink cognac in the evenings to wash away the tiredness and tension. Not like a drunk, just a glass. It’s enough for now.

The third day I go to the bandit outpost and ask for the ataman.

Chapter 10

Gavrish ran over very quickly. He must have gotten tired of waiting while calculating what might happen next.

“You seem like you’ve put on a little weight,” the ataman greets me.

“I think I’ve just spent enough time lying down. You take a full account of the base?”

“Not yet. They just got the bodies out, and they’re still cleaning the shit up.”

“Okay. Chief asked to tell you that this compound is now under your control. Well, we’ll take some stuff from time to time, but most of it is yours. Own it and control it!”

“What will I owe?”

“People. There will be a need for armed help…”

“No problem,” the ataman nods. “Will do! People are still coming here, you understand… They think I executed Makar with my guys.”

“And?”

“There’s good things, and bad. Not everyone is happy, to be honest.”

“You can tell the most curious ones the truth, they’ll quiet down. Say you had to pay dearly for these warehouses. You can make up what the pay was. You can explain that Makar crossed Predator and he paid.”

Gavrish smirks.

“They already saw what bullets killed Makar’s guys. Rumors are already spreading.”

Seems the story is developing without my help. Is that good or bad? Fuck if I know…

"So… You got a safe cracking specialist?"

"I'll find one."

"I need to break open a safe."

"Where?"

"Same place."

Gavrish smirks.

"I was wondering. That's where the bodies are. Makar took something that wasn't his?"

"Yeah, it wasn't…"

* * *

Three days after Makar's warehouses were taken over by Gavrish's men, Kaban initiated a meeting with the ataman. Where he learned about all this remained a secret. But the old bandit wasn't in a good mood…

"You thinking straight?" he asked Gavrish glumly.

"What do you mean?"

"Why did you move on Makar?! He was an honest thief."

"Okay…" The young bandit put his palm up in front of his chest. "Don't rock the boat. Who told you that?"

“Heard it through the grapevine!”

“Well you should cut that grapevine down! You know Yuri the Nose?”

“Well?”

“Can you trust him?”

“He’s a good man! Doesn’t lie!”

The ataman nodded, stood up and came to the door, yelling for one of his guards.

“Call the Nose!”

Upon entering the room Yuri nodded respectfully, greeting the old bandit.

“My respect to honest travelers!”

Kaban nodded and turned to the ataman.

“Well?”

“Nose, you were first on Makar’s base, right?” Gavrish turned to him. “Who met you?”

“You know who—Predator’s man was at the gates!”

“Which one is that?”

“Vortex! He lives somewhere around here, guys see him often.”

“And what did he say?”

“Said that we can take over the base, a gift from the Predator.”

“And what did you see?”

“Well… dead people. They were in every building. And Makar, he was still alive. Locked up at the pole.”

“And what about the barrack near him?”

“That was fucked up! Like two dozen bodies, just stacked.” The Nose shook his head. “I’m used to shit like that, and even I got queasy. And this dude, Vortex, was walking around like he was at home.”

“Anyone else there?”

“Nope, he was the only one waiting for us. That’s what he said—you don’t need to do anything here, I took care of everything myself. Just clean this up.”

“Okay, Nose, thanks!” Gavrish nodded. “Go, I’ll take it from here…”

The bandit nodded and left.

“You saw this guy,” he explained, “at that meeting…”

“And you wanna tell me that this was done by one person,” Kaban scoffed.

“No, I don’t think so. But he was alone at Makar’s place, honestly! It wasn’t just the Nose that saw him, you wanna talk to others?”

The old bandit shook his head.

“Why did you get this bounty?”

“You think I know? Vortex said that I’ll owe them. When he calls, I’m to send my guys.”

“And will you?”

Gavrish took his hand out of his pocket and opened his fist. Several flattened bullets with blue tips fell on the table.

“These were Makar’s guys. His closest, the ones he trusted with his life. Do you think that he’d keep idiots so close?”

“Well…”

“I don’t wanna experiment here! Kirrill is enough, he caught the same bullet.”

“All right…” Kaban rose from his chair in a sour mood. “I’ll pass it on to Foma. But this Predator… No one knows him and no one’s seen him before. Who the hell is he anyway? Maybe you’re just being made a fool? And there’s no one else, just that single dude?”

“Then who killed the two dozen at Makar’s base, a mosquito? Shot up, blown up with grenades, some killed with a knife, you think they did it to themselves? Both slaves and the tough guys, all dead! Who is so indiscriminate? Who gives so little fucks about everyone? Who would dare tie up a thief with a chain?!”

“You had issues with Makar, no?”

“I did. We even punched and shot at each other in the city. So what? Who doesn’t do that? Did his guys have a sign that told me who they are? What, your guys never shoot at anyone? I didn’t go to his base, you can ask anyone!” Gavrish exploded.

“I asked already,” the old bandit said. “Would I be talking to you otherwise? You got lucky, it happens. But don’t raise your nose too high: it can be dangerous.”

* * *

“Hmm!” A fairly plain looking man examines the safe. “And someone bothered to carry this thing all the way here…”

“Well it might have been here for ages!” I shrug. “They even made a hole for it.”

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “It was made for something else, look how much distance there is to the wall. There used to be some regular metal box here…”

He knocks on the wall of the safe with a screwdriver.

“There’s monazite sand here, there’s extra protection. Fireproof. I saw Terra Group buying these up myself. And had a chance to get close to one, it’s pretty good!”

“And how do you crack one?”

“Oxy-fuel won’t help. It’ll take ages and to what end? We cut off the hinges, but there are locking pins on all four sides. We need to come up with a different approach.”

“Well, go for it!” I say. “Gavrish said that I’d be hard pressed to find a professional like you!”

The dude smirks proudly.

“He might be pushing it. But I’m no slouch either.”

He opens a small suitcase and pulls out a stethoscope. He sticks it into his ears and sits down on the floor.

“Everybody leave…”

Who's going to leave? Just the two of us in the room. I kicked all the others out the door earlier. I guess that's what he says... He turns the knob in

different directions for a bit, listening to it. He taps a screwdriver on the massive safe. I sit quietly to the side, it's best not to get in the way of someone working, especially when you don't understand the work. Half an hour passes.

"Give me a drink!"

There are cans of beer on a shelf, I hand him one. At my request they brought some snacks from the warehouse. It's going to be a while, and hunger does not wait!

The master sips the beer and places the can on the floor.

He turns the handle again.

"Yeah... five times, huh? Hmm…"

Suddenly he turns the handle! The safe door moves a bit.

"Done! Inspect my work!"

Even an hour had not passed! Now that's a specialist!

He smirks with satisfaction and places his tools in his suitcase.

"You look, and I'll grab a bite to eat if you don't mind…"

He goes to the table with the snacks and beer.

"There is vodka too! On the floor to the left."

"Yeah... I see it already."

There are three compartments in the safe, the top one is locked with a key. I assume that's one of the keys I found in Makar's pocket. There were

several, and one of them worked! In the upper compartment there are two stacks of money, dollars and euros. Thick, even at first glance it's obvious the amount here is decent. A heavy cardboard box with all kinds of gold trinkets. And one more box, that's the one I'll hide in my pocket! At the bottom there are plenty of useful things too. But mostly it's papers. Some folders with plans and drawings. They demand serious examination, I can't tell shit at first glance. But since Makar has hidden them here it is safe to assume that these papers have some value. I put the folders in my backpack so that the specialist sees it too. Let him think that this all was for these documents.

In general the safe met my expectations, the whole siege was worth it just for that. I generously pull a handful of trinkets out of the box and put it on the table in front of the safecracker.

"We even?"

Obviously the ataman does not keep him hungry, but that's between them. It's more useful for me to maintain a reputation of a generous employer.

The dude looks at the pile of gold in front of him.

"It will do!"

"Then you keep eating, and I'll go away for a while."

Actually, I am planning to leave the base. But I'm not in a hurry to inform anyone about my intentions, no matter what... they know less, I'll live longer! It's definitely calmer for me.

The contents of the small box are hard to overestimate! The flash drive keys, five in total. And something interesting, clean blanks! Okay, enough travelling for a while, I need to understand what fell into my hands.

Here's what the documents said:

"In order to minimize the potential negative consequences of an emergency evacuation it is proposed that a number of special storage facilities be established and equipped within a period of three months...
...Provide autonomous power supply system for each special facility, for which work and equipment should be coordinated with Department 3K...
...In order to prevent access by unauthorized persons it is necessary to provide several levels of protection. In connection to this it is required to carry out retrofitting of inlet locks with autonomous control and identification systems...
...Department 4C has to calculate equipment requirements based on a possible duration of three years of instability...
...Division B has to select and instruct a number of staff members from USEC operators and authorized representatives of the Technical Office, in accordance with the attached list..."

The list was five whole pages! When I finish translating it, I understand that there are still some puzzles here. According to the documents I read, these people each had varying degrees of access. They were just flash drive key holders that knew no special information about the purpose of the keys. Their duty was just to open the objects and maintain order. Or they were tasked with purely technical work, like maintaining equipment and various mechanisms. Information about the location of a particular object was usually given to them at the last moment, upon receiving the instructions.

There were also foremen, people responsible for notifying these key carriers. These are more serious figures and they had information about several sites at once.

And the third level is leadership. Tactfully titled crisis managers in the documents.

These had much more authority, way more!

Great documents, just awesome!

The trouble lay elsewhere!

Nowhere, not in any folder or on a separate leaflet, was there any specific addresses! But at least I know that there is an object somewhere. The local variety of the cave of Ali Baba.

So?

Where is it located?

There certainly won't be any signs or markings, these people aren't that fucking crazy. No matter what, Terra Group have always planned correctly! Everyone knows exactly as much as they need to, and not a morsel more! And where would I stick this key? I know what to do. I am aware of the order and sequence of actions. But where is the door itself? Where do I put this key? Okay, let's try again... I turn on the laptop and, having connected one of the flash drives to the computer, I dive into research. This is our master key, so to speak. As it states in the instructions: A first level access device. There is a file with instructions on it. Password-protected, the previous owner helped me, his computer had a key-generation program. So after a while the text of the instruction appeared on the screen.

Turns out that the only person that can enter the door is the one who holds the flash drive. Meaning that any attempt to get close to the object by anyone who doesn't have it has a good chance of not getting anywhere at all.

"...Shutdown of security and defense systems in the case this is not guaranteed...". Short and clear. Clear what these lines mean… In addition, there is also a program for creating a new key. With a built-in counter, which means the number of new keys is strictly limited. By the way, this counter was also tinkered with by the previous owner. Apparently, he needed a lot of new keys...

Now I understand the purpose of the empty flash drives. By making backup keys (second-level access devices), the responsible officer provided

access to the secure room for those he considered necessary. If there's a flash drive key in the group, you go. No? Well, then I'm sorry!

Is that clear? Yes, I get it. Okay, but then it means that there is another gimmick that opens the door itself? Everything points to the fact that yes, there should be such a key. And what kind of thing is that? I'm going to go through the documentation again.

Oh, Makar... and where did you get all of this? And you were smart enough to understand the value of some unsightly folders with what looked like useless papers!

"In accordance with paragraph 2.7 of the instructions, to provide access for authorized persons to the storage room #9C they shall receive the required number of key cards ...
...the key cards are issued in strict accordance with the attached lists...
...the device providing the required level of access is issued in the amount of one device for each group that holds a keycard…"

Well, I highly doubt that someone in Terra Group leadership was paranoid enough to come up with any more protection for these vaults. There's already a two-factor access system.

The flash key allows one to approach the keycard reader. And that in turn opens the actual door. Don't have one of these, you're done. Left sitting there scratching your ass... And from what I understand, the flash drive keys are programmed and issued by one group of people, while the keycards are issued by another.

And all of them act separately, guided only by their lists. If your name isn't on the list, get the hell out! And even if someone can convince one officer, then there's the other one, he also needs to be persuaded. Mm-hmm... And also found. For some reason I doubt that his address will be found in the phone book.

Well, it's a valuable find in any case!

I now have some flash keys. And I can make copies too.

Great!

Some of the stuff can even be sold to the traders. But here I have to be extremely careful! There are two more tasks. Find storage room #9C. Or at least one keycard. And it would be nice to have the addresses for these doors...

* * *

“You're an interesting guy!” The person I’m talking to isn’t shy and looks me over.

I don't mind, you don’t have to pay to look at me, I’m not a cinema. I look around.

He chose a bunker for our meeting. Judging by the setup it used to belong to the Communications Department. There are brackets attaching cables to the wall. It’s all very spartan. A couple of tables, a few chairs and that's it.

What is behind the closed door is unknown. I have a similar door behind me, but there are two angry dudes with assault rifles sitting behind it. The client's security, I have to assume...

“I’m just average…” I shrug my shoulders. “Lucky to be in the right place…”

“...at the right time!” Prapor nods. “I've heard this saying!”

Yes, I have a meeting with him. And the invitation was passed on by none other than Mr. Ogryzko. It probably wasn’t pleasurable, but apparently he couldn't say no to him.

“I hear you enjoy cognac?”

I wonder how he heard that?

“Yes. If it's good.”

“Well, I'm more partial to vodka... But we have people who know their stuff!”

A bottle appears on the table. Dvin, aged five years.

Not a bad choice!

A can of herring in wine sauce, a package of processed cheese, and some more treats. Not bad for a start!

“I don't even know what to toast to…” My interlocutor scratches his chin thoughtfully. “To drink to your health is to drink to someone else's demise…”

“Let’s say we drink to this one not being the last, okay?”

“I’ll drink to that!”

He's a peculiar man, I must say. Arms and ammunition trading is, as far as I know, his main activity. He sells a little bit of everything, people say, but in tiny amounts. So what does he live off? Just on the sale of guns, really? Well... let's see, he didn't invite me over for nothing, did he?

The second shot of cognac went down very nicely. And good snacks to go with!

“You must be guessing why I asked you to meet me.”

“If you need to, you can tell me. And if you don’t, I’ll just have some good cognac in the company of a serious person.”

He smirks.

“Interesting! I wonder who you mean now?”

But he doesn’t pour the third shot yet, he puts the bottle aside.

“You're right, I have a question! I want to see your main guy!”

I laugh.

“No, don't think I’m insulting you, I will pass on your request. Except…” I shake my head. “I doubt that you would enjoy this meeting.”

“Why?”

“Nobody’s seen him. Even me. I think that none of us know anything about him at all.”

“That can’t happen… You contacted him in some way, didn't you?”

“That was ages ago! The network was operational, the Internet existed, so we talked there all the time.”

The interlocutor bites his lip.

“You going to tell me he sends you text messages now?”

“No, of course not. But these conversations never bring joy. You get the back of the head tickled with a barrel, you’re advised not to turn your head, and we talk to each other.”

“This is not an option! After all, someone else can do that, not just him.”

“Maybe.” I nod. “But so far I have never met a fool that would try that. It’s dumb… and unsafe.”

“Well … I don't know…” Prapor frowns thoughtfully. “Is he capable of

approaching me like that?"

"He approached me. And Kiruha, Gavrish... visited Makar too. And he had his own guards! No one has ever seen him ... Ask Hood, he is doing business with him! So he must know something."

He pours himself a shot and, without toasting, drinks it quickly.

"Hmm! You speak wonders... why should he hide like that? Who is he hiding from?"

"Not the person to tell you that. And, frankly, I don't even want to have such conversations… he has ears anywhere. I'm not planning on dying yet."

"I don't have rats!"

"I'm happy for you. Kiruha and Makar thought so too…"

While the shopkeeper ponders, I don't waste any time and enthusiastically eat all the food on the table. But I refrain from the cognac…

Finally my companion comes to some decision. He slams his palm on his knee.

"Okay! He will come, we will talk like that… In the meantime, I have a specific question!"

"I'm listening."

"The nurse... that your work?"

"Not just me."

"I know about Makar, of course... So!"

The issue was as follows. The trader had no personal armed formations, just

guards. And all manner of helpers... But some specific suggestions needed to be made from time to time. The number of crazy people in the city was growing rapidly! And shooting potential clientele is somewhat bad for business. What kind of trader fights with his customers?

“Here’s how it will go. I give you a name of a real asshole that’s bothering everyone. Your boss finishes him. I don’t give a shit how it happens. I pay for it. Thirty percent in advance! The rest upon completion of the order. But no connections and references to me, this is exclusively your beef! I will tell everyone that they say the Predator doesn’t like attacks and ambushes, business has to be honest! He has a share in the whole industry, so he is worried...”

“Yeah, and you complained…”

Prapor squints.

“That’s a thought! You think this needs to happen another way?”

“Ears... I didn’t mention them for nothing.”

The trader grins.

“Yes... they say someone told him that I was suffering losses, and he didn’t like it. So he sent someone to reason with this fool.”

“And he was rude to that person…”

“You got a head on your shoulders! One more?!”

“Let’s do it!”

We had a good time…

Just before I left, Prapor notices my assault rifle.

“Why are you using an AKS-74?I When you’re at a short distance and in a hurry, it’s useless!”

“Any suggestions?”

“You are cunning!” He carefully considers my weapon. “Well... the add-ons on the whole are normal. But I could still improve it!”

We agreed that in a few days I will visit his lair. I think I understand why he started this whole conversation! He needs to show that the Predator’s messenger shows up to handle the fights with his more unscrupulous clients. Well, everything has a price! And in Tarkov it is sometimes very strange! For some things, you can pay with money. Other things are acquired through barter. And some things demand payment in blood…

“Send my regards to Khokhol!” Upon parting, he gives me a bag with two bottles of vodka. “Tell him we’re even.”

So Ogryzko is known as Khokhol, which is a slightly derogatory term for Ukrainian. Did not know that.

But I still have time, and dawn caught me on the road. The destination is not too far, and I even know the road, more or less. Before I leave, I drop in on a nearby shopkeeper. Friendly nod to Kaban and I plop down on a chair in front of his chief. I now have a certain privilege, I can sit next to him, for that purpose there is even a table and a couple of chairs in a separate room. And I understand Mr. Ogryzko too. With all his might he has to blow smoke, as if to say that he has some important business with this figure... not intended for outsider ears. But in general, not much is required of me, just keep quiet with a meaningful face and occasionally make vague hints. Well, if this is enjoyable for the merchant, then why not keep silent sometimes?

“So, how was your conversation with Prapor?”
“It’s all right... He asked for the Predator. I will pass it on, of course, let the leader decide.”

Artemy frowns, he does not like this news. It seems that a competitor wants to bypass him... and what does that lead to?

“Well, I don’t need this... I can always talk to you, right?”

“True,” I confirm. “And I will convey your words further, like it should be.”

“What,” the shopkeeper sympathetically asks, “will you actually walk there?”

“Why walk? Got a radio... Some things I can pass on with that.”

“So,” Khohol says, “in case of emergency, you can quickly solve an issue?”

“It depends on the situation... I think the chief barely leaves his hole. More likely to pass it on through trusted people.”

“And how far away is that hole?”

“I haven’t been…”

A peculiar conversation.

He was obviously going to say something, or ask... but he never said anything. All right. As an old acquaintance used to say, we’ll figure it out as we go along.

Chapter 11

The city's getting really uncomfortable now. There's more garbage, although I still can't understand where it's coming from. There's no construction, the houses are still standing... The dead are also multiplying, I noticed three bodies. And what's worse, one of them was thoughtfully crucified on the fence. I look at the dead man through binoculars for a good twenty minutes. I found a very cool pair among Makarov's junk, even has image stabilization! Even found batteries for it. I grabbed all the power supplies I saw, cleaned everything out! The bandits don't need them and I'll find a use for them.

I strongly dislike what I see. The dead man's face doesn't show any pain. Apparently when he was nailed to the fence, he didn't feel anything. He didn't even try to break out, which was confusing. There are no visible cuts or scratches on the body, blood is contained to where the limbs were pierced. Didn't he try something to save himself?

I make a detour, passing the spot on another route. After thirty minutes I'm already looking at the fence from the other side. Here are the nails, passed right through the wood. I mean, that's not surprising. 100 millimeters is enough. But they're not bent on this side. And the man had nothing to lose, so he could have tried to get the nail loose! Doubtful it would help, but the people that strung him up had to consider that possibility. But the nails aren't bent…

Why? Were they so sure that the victim wouldn't have enough strength? Not likely, the dude didn't look like he was on his last legs. Were there guards? Was it target practice? An unfounded risk.

So there had to be another reason… and I don't know it! Damn, it's a terrible sight, a dead person strung up on a fence with a calm look on his face. God forbid you dream of something like that… Jeez, I think I best avoid this place. Who is doing this? I don't want neighbors like that. Several shots ring out around the corner and I immediately run to a nearby

building. The shooting is pretty active. Worse, it's getting closer.

It's a bummer my lock opening device disappeared without a trace at Makar's base. Although I asked the bandits to make something similar for me, and it's coming in handy. And they also shared their experience cracking locks and doors. Breaking in was common practice for them! So now I quickly reach into my backpack, grab the folding crowbar, screw it together, and boom, the first door in the building is open.

Second, third, and that's enough.

I hide in the second apartment after I make a mess in the first one. The logic is simple. There's four apartments, and three have their doors open. The first is messy with stuff thrown on the floor from the closets, so there's nothing to look for in there or any of the other open ones. There could be something useful in the one that's not broken into, so that's where they'll go. And I'll hear them. I also hid a bullet shell on top of the front door. They'll push the door, the bullet will fall and make a noise — guests have arrived. I don't want to fight anyone here, it's not my business. Other people's fights should be handled by other people. They're really going to town on each other out there! Wow, with grenades, too! So I guess the locals armed themselves pretty well if they're using something besides shotguns. A man running across the street comes into view. As expected, with an assault rifle. He ran for ten meters, fell to the ground, and waited for the enemy.

One second, two, and he spits out an AK bullet.

A guy in camo falls to the ground after stupidly peeking out behind the corner. Then his buddies launch suppressive fire at the shooter. I empathize and I'm not envious at all, there's a lot more of them there. The shooter, barking back with a burst of bullets, fell back—there was a basement entrance there. That makes sense, the brick wall is bound to stop a bullet. But I still feel sorry for him, his opponents are smart and experienced. No one ran into the line of fire and they suppressed the enemy well. One running, two shooting. They're pretty good at this…

The shooter only manages to get a couple shots off and immediately they make him hide behind a brick wall. His opponents (I can see them pretty well at that point) are firing from US automatic rifles, so they can't pierce the wall, but their shots are closely grouped and in dangerous proximity to the man hiding behind cover.

Yep, he's a dead man.

Now they're gonna get closer and throw a grenade at him… Suddenly, from behind the corner, another guy appears, this time with a shotgun. Who he was or where he came from—hell if I know, but it's not just a regular dude. At least judging by how he's handling his gun.

Bam!

One of the men providing the cover falls face down.

Bam!

The shot flings another man to the side. Finally, the one running towards cover turns around in time to get his dose of lead. And that's it. Just a moment ago they were running, pinning their opponent into a corner and then poof. And the people he killed were USEC guys! The uniform, the guns, there's no mistaking them. The victor stopped and the first thing he did was reload. A professional!

"Hey! You still alive?"

From behind the bullet-peppered wall the nervous shooter peeked out. He looks at the battlefield. There's definitely things to see…

"Alive…"

"So get the hell out of there, what you sitting around for?"

He comes out, cautiously glancing around.

“How many were there?”

“Well, six, my guys got two, I got one. But they didn't get away with it, all three of our guys were left dead, I’m the only one breathing.”

“Then we relax! We ran out of opponents. Who will you be?”

“I’m… from the port security.”

“Misha Falin's group, are you?”

“Yeah.”

The man with the shotgun only shook his head.

“And where did he find losers like you? There's a nest at the USEC, they're always going back and forth! And he sent only four of you.”

“We were carrying cargo, our hands were busy… Otherwise we wouldn't have given up!”

“We wouldn’t, you were… okay, let's go check it out.”

The shotgun owner turns to the side where the shooter came from. And at that moment he throws up his assault rifle and lets off a short burst into the back of his savior! Wow, now that’s a twist!

The man folds literally in half, drops his shotgun.

“You bitch…”

“You can tell on me to Falin," the shooter shrugs his shoulders. “Why the fuck would I answer for everyone?”

What a bastard, huh? You were basically brought back from the dead and

that’s your response?

I carefully move from the wall and slowly raise my assault rifle. There hasn’t been glass in the window for a while now, so that's why I can hear everything so well. I’m on the first floor… I can also shoot without breaking the windows like people do in action movies. By the way, I've always wondered about that. The villain not only breaks the glass in the window, but also for some reason clears the remnants of broken glass out! Can anyone tell me why he does that?

Okay, let's even say the glass itself prevents him from doing something (no idea what). Okay, he breaks it. But the fragments, what danger do they pose? What do they get in the way of? They don’t stop you from shooting in any way. And all the opponents of the villain don’t react to these actions, just silently look on as he prepares. He would have been killed five times in real life!

But this is not a movie!

The KS clicks dryly and the shooter falls face down on the asphalt.

I don't overthink it and jump right out of the window. It's not too high and I won't break my limbs. Look right to left, don't see anybody yet. I mean, I don't see anybody that’s living. And the dead are not dangerous. The shooter twists on the ground. Seems I got him good! He doesn't scream, just moans one long note. It hurts!

The silencer turns the sound of the shot into a loud click and he’s out of his misery. But the man with the shotgun is still alive. Though not for long, there is a puddle of blood under him!

“How you doing?” I ask as I sit down next to him.

“Fucked up… Who the fuck are you?”

“I'm the Predator.”

“I see you’re not a pigeon…” He moans as he attempts a smile. But he's not very successful.

It is useless to bandage the man, even I get that. I just don't have the time, he'll die first.

“You want a drink?”

“You got any?”

I take off my cognac flask and give it to him. After a few large sips he drops it, his hands are not obeying.

“Wow... sorry…"

“Forget it! There's nothing else I can do for you, I'm sorry…”

“I know, I’m not an idiot.”
“And the dude that shot you, I killed him.”

“I saw... And thank you for that. Tell Mishka... that Yasha Sova said hello. Tell the guys at the gate and they’ll let you through.”

He’s already speaking more slowly, the loss of blood is getting to him. And the cognac probably helped, he drank almost half a flask in one sip!

“Look in my bag... it will come in handy…”

The end, he's dead too.

Mm-hm... a pretty shitty start to the day... His bag was almost empty, just a couple boxes of cartridges, some food... A plastic box in which something rattling around. A pair of grenades—now that's useful! And a new red scarf, which is utterly useless! Shotgun of the deceased, a usual MP-153, known as Murka, which I have no use for currently. But I shouldn’t leave it

in the street. But into the window of the apartment I just left is quite a good spot. At some point I'll go there and hide it better. The killer's assault rifle also goes in there, along with a simple strap. I also examine the other dead people, take their weapons and ammunition. It will go towards trading. Or come in handy in some other situation.

Turning the corner, I find a few more dead bodies. You have to be very careful here, this place is visible from many directions! Hiding, jumping, and running from cover to cover, I check a few more bodies. Something can be looted here too.
The cargo!

The murderer was talking about some kind of cargo!

I look around.

Well, most likely it's that grey box over there. It's laying near the corner of the building. And five meters from it is another dead man. Apparently he was one of the porters. Next to him is his weapon, a machine gun! Wow! The box is unexpectedly heavy, I could barely move it. I dragged it to the corner, sweat rolling down my body! Which makes sense, as I was crawling too, that's twice as difficult. I get it over the windowsill with a push and look back at the street I left behind. Shit, I'd also like to take the machine gun! But something keeps me from going for it, this bait looks too tempting. On the one hand, a machine gun is a good thing! And on the other hand, it's heavy. And I'm not that great a machine gunner. No, I won't go after it. Greed leads to poverty, I remember that well!

* * *

"Well, where is he?"

"He'll come, he'll be too greedy to leave such a thing behind!"

"We'll see… he doesn't look like any regular rat, moves very carefully. Crawling, running. Almost never coming out from behind cover."

“This is either a very cautious and experienced fighter, or the opposite, a complete sucker, unsure and unwilling to get into firefight. But in any case this device is too valuable to be left by anybody!”

“Well, brother, you know better... Don't lose him!”

But the sniper waited in an ambush for several hours in vain, the careful stranger never showed up...

* * *

Having climbed into the next building and broken the lock in another apartment, I open the box carried by Falin’s men. I expected to find any of a number of things, but... The cargo consisted exclusively of computer hard drives. Each of them was packed in a separate plastic box with a note: "The computer from the accounting firm A-trade, belonged to the chief accountant.”
"The second computer from the port management logistics department.”

And so on like that. Estimating how many computers they had to break in order to fill this box, I involuntarily respect the unknown hard workers. On some disks I see traces of blood, they were obviously not easy to get! This is bullshit. Why do they (who?) need them now? Obviously, people didn’t do this for the love of the craft, there was some important reason. But what? Without having solved anything, I hide the disks in secluded corners of the apartment and dump the empty box from the window, one on the opposite side of the house from the road. Which reminds me. I take out the box from the late Yasha from my backpack. And what do we have here? Also a real surprise, there’s nothing of value. No money here, just a dozen keys.

Judging by the shape of the keys and their complexity, they weren’t meant for regular doors. Some keys have inscriptions on them, a couple have tags. Mostly numbers, probably for numbered offices in a specific place. There are three numbers on the tags.

Pumping station No. 4.

Polychem Power Substation.

Server room #2.

The late Sova clearly had a reason to carry these keys. The box was bound with tape so that it wouldn't accidentally open in a backpack. Some of the keys are grouped together on metal rings. It wasn't random, there has to be a system here... I didn't have to overthink the guns, everything was clear.

I started with USECs, their equipment and weapons are clearly more expensive than the guys from the port had. Among other things I even found two radios. Four assault rifles, one submachine gun that used the same ammunition as my pistol. A very well-groomed machine to be truthful, with a silencer and a complex device on the handguard. A flashlight and even a laser pointer, it's got everything! And his magazines are double-size, connected using a special clip. There are six of them in total, each for thirty cartridges.

After examining the weapon, I surmise that at short distances it'd be very convenient. The cartridge is not as powerful as on the KS, which means that it will have much less kickback. And it certainly makes less noise. And as for power, well, I'm not planning on fighting a tank! Seven ordinary fragmentation grenades, I remember these from many computer games. The two cylindrical ones are smoke grenades. Why the fuck would you need those? Who are we planning to send signals to? The opponents of the USECs were armed with simpler weapons. Besides the machine gun I left at the battlefield, there were two shotguns and an assault rifle. The rifle was old and had seen a lot in its lifetime. Shotguns are MR-153s, nothing special. Half a hundred cartridges for the assault rifle, and a little more for the shotguns.

Two grenades. They never had time to use them in action, the grim reaper caught up with them earlier.

The only pistols were from the USECs. Four of them. One Glock, two Berettas and the familiar ZIG. Got a lot of cartridges for them, now these I'm definitely taking with me! And the submachine gun, really like it! Convenient, comfortable, with all sorts of gimmicks on it too, can come in very useful. As for the rest of the goods… well, I'll leave them here for now. I didn't leave anything in plain sight, and even made a mess in the apartment so it's clear that there's nothing more to find here!

It's getting dark already...

Yes, using the night vision device I can move around at night. But I can't avoid making noise, I can't see that well with it.

Makes you think.

Sitting around, let alone sleeping in the area where crucified men hang on fences is not something I want to do. It's decided, I'm moving forward! The first half a kilometer I literally crawl, sticking to the ground and walls. Nobody fires a gun, no one showed their presence at all. So then I speed up a bit, and I get a little more used to the specifics of my current environment.

And there is a nightlife here!

Some sounds, utterly absent in the daylight, were heard from almost every direction. I understand that some of them are caused by nature, but the sound of cautious steps is not a very usual background noise! Maybe such sounds were quite natural for the Tarkov that used to be, but now... There is no need to walk at night! It is not safe. However, during the daytime it's not much better. I notice dim reflections of light in a window of one of the buildings and realize that some dimwit decided to make a fire! Obviously it can only be seen using a night vision device, but I'm not the only person that has one! No, some comrades definitely lost their fucking minds…

Two kilometers away, I'm thinking I could look for a safe place to hide out. I hope that unpleasant area is behind me now.

A standard apartment is quite a suitable place to stay overnight. There's bound to be some bed or sofa there. And though I'm not planning on relaxing completely, you know, I'm not going to climb naked under a blanket, you have to agree that lying on a soft sofa is preferable to spending the night on a rigid floor! So I'm looking for a place of refuge. The first entrance wasn't an option, it smelled like rotting bodies, and I wouldn't be able to get any sleep at all. For the same reason I walk past the second entrance.

But the third one...

Oh, man...

Everything looks to be okay, the windows have glass, and there's not much stench. But something holds me back... I look around. Nearby, a house has burned to the ground, apparently the fire was pretty powerful. A little further away is a modern building, all glass and aluminum. It is absolutely unsafe to sleep in a building like that, everything can be seen and shot through.

It turns out that there is not much choice. This is exactly what worries me! There is inconvenient, here is impossible, over there it's disgusting, and this is the only option!

And then there's an open space, a square. While it's dark, it's not an issue to cross it, unless the unknown villain has a night vision device. I see everything very well using my unit, and I think that my opponent, if real, is also capable of that.

Go back and bypass this place?

Reasonable, but I'm just not drawn in that direction.

What do I do?

The next second I press to the ground, attempting to become small and invisible. Because on the left, I hear footsteps, several people at once. Quiet, but I can still hear them. There's a knoll right there, that's the new goal!

The knoll turned out to be a small overturned billboard, like one of the many that used to line the city streets. This thing does not protect from bullets at all, but it does protect from curious glances!

"Jasper, check the nearest entrance!"

"Yes, sir!"

In English... USECs?

Most likely. In the afternoon I saw a few, and the late Sova was talking about them. Greeting them? Fuck that! They'll shoot first and then wonder who it was. Let them walk by...

They head straight for the very entrance I was considering. Good thing I didn't go there... The door creaks, careful steps, muted voices, and the whole group is in the building. A few minutes later I see a faint glow of light in one of the windows. They found a place to sleep it seems…

Well, let them have a good night's sleep, I'm gonna scram, I really don't want neighbors like that. These dudes came from the left. Not quite where I was heading, but at least there is nobody there now. Otherwise these guys wouldn't have appeared so quietly. That's good, that's where I'm heading...

A sound...

Scratching or something similar. It came from the side of the house. What does it matter that there was a noise… so what? Could be that one of the USECs decided to open a door or something.

But something stuck me... I've heard that noise before!

Where?

Not in a past life, that's for sure.

“A step. Don't fall. Hold on to the wall…" These words came from one of the people that were with me. Yes, just after my visit to Mishka! But there was something before that! Before I was told anything. The metal squeaked, yes! Just like now!

Click, and I can see the entrance in the eyepieces of my night vision. There is no one on the street, which is quite understandable. There is no need to give away your overnight location, and the sentry can look through the windows and listen. If so, he would open a window, thus giving away his location. Someone may well remember which windows were opened and which were not.

Or he chooses a window without glass... Because the audio will improve significantly.

And where do we have one here?

There it is, on the second floor, to the left of the entrance. There is no glass in the kitchen window, the moon does not reflect there. The neighboring windows are shining, but this window makes no reflection!

There's a sentry there most likely... I don't observe any light from his night vision device (if he has one), but that doesn't mean anything. It can work passively, too. Like mine does now, since I don't want to give myself away either.

So what do I do?

If I come out of my hiding spot, he's gonna get me right away.

Bang!

A grenade!

And in that very kitchen...

He doesn't care about me now!

"Where the hell are you going?" My inner voice is outraged. "We have absolutely no need for other people's shit!"

These thoughts come to me when I'm already running. In my hands I hold the trophy submachine gun. It has an interesting feature, when the switch is in a certain position the block of the target designation turns on its illumination. It is almost invisible. But with night vision you can see it wonderfully! The same goes for the laser pointer, you can't see it with your normal eyes, but using night vision… Not just the target, also everything around it is lit up! But I don't turn it on, no need to give myself away before the time comes.

Dry clicks from automatic rifles, shotguns blare in response. That's where the gleams of light were visible. Now they're killing USECs there. The door to the entrance is ajar, I try to infiltrate it quietly...

Dampness!

Something smells distinctly cold and damp!

The switch clicks, a bright light spot reflects off the walls. I see an open door to the basement. What's interesting is that it was opened together with the door frame, a normal barn lock hangs peacefully on the loops. A locked lock...

And what do we have here?

Why the basement? I really don't want anyone to shoot me in the back. And the guys fighting upstairs don't care about me right now.

Here is the door!

The house is a normal five-story building without a deep basement. Almost immediately upon entering I see an opening in the wall. That's where the damp smell is coming from... I pick up a tarpaulin mitten from the floor left by someone ages ago and quickly shove three hand grenades into it. I don't know how strong the wall and ceiling are... but an explosion of so many grenades at the same time should be enough to break it. It is unlikely that it was strengthened with cast iron tubes, like they did in the Moscow subway! Even if the ceiling doesn't collapse the guys up there will definitely be in enough pain to forget warring for a little bit…

I pull and a ring flies off to the side.

The mitten flies into to the depths of the corridor.

Run away!

I run as fast a bullet to the first floor and fall to the floor, covering my ears with my hands and opening my mouth...

Boom!!!

And still I get a shockwave.

The floor hits me so hard in my belly that for a while my vision goes dark. I have a nasty metallic taste in my mouth, and my ears are ringing.

The blast wave blew out the front door to kingdom come. It's good I didn't run in that direction... Some heavy piece of wood would've crushed me! Like a cockroach getting smashed with a slipper. I turn on my back and sit up, pulling my legs up against my stomach. It's a bit difficult to run now... Feet stomping, someone is in a hurry to come downstairs! A clever person would not immediately run in the direction of an explosion, first they'd think about it. What was that explosion? Did it all go off at once, or can we expect more? So whoever is running down here is a stupid person. Or he's

following orders from his superiors, and sometimes those can be very strange. In the eyepieces of my device there appears a figure with strange outlines. Weird head. Wait, that's a hood!

The hands decided for themselves, the submachine gun coughs deeply. It shoots much quieter than the KS! And at such distances it's not any less effective. The unknown guest was thrown back, bent at his waist, done!

And now upstairs!

Doesn't matter if I want to. It is necessary!

Well run then!

Turn, another turn, I stumble over a body lying on the floor. And another one. Everyone is in some kind of cape, I can't make them out. From a doorway to the side I smell the sour smell of explosives, that's where the sentry was. The next floor, a body in a raincoat face down. But at the door of the apartment occupied by the USECs the caped men are present, and quite alive, unlike their buddies. And very active too, their shotguns and assault rifles not stopping even for a second. From the depths of the apartment someone was sluggishly shooting back, but it seems like the end... Having retreated a couple of steps, I throw another grenade upstairs. And I immediately bend down so that my own fragments do not punish me for being careless.

Bam!

Something squeals above my head, the precaution was not superfluous at all!

Jump up and the submachine gun spits out the rest of the ammunition.

I'm changing the magazine...

In the sudden silence I can hear droplets falling inside the apartment.

Spilled something?

“Anyone living?”

“Who are you?”

“Do you care? The one who came to your rescue. Do you understand Russian?”

“Yes, I do.”

We continue in a mix of Russian and English.

“Well, then come out. There are no living opponents here anymore.”

A noise, I see reflections in the eyepieces of my night sight. The dude coming from the depths of the apartment has a similar device to mine, in active mode.

Looks like a serious man! Did he sleep without taking off his equipment? IIFS, a backpack… lots of stuff hanging on him!

He looks around, shakes his head respectfully.

“Is that your work?”

“Seems they did it to themselves. Probably a tortured conscience…”

“What? Conscience? Are you kidding?” he says in English. Then in broken Russian: “Are you so… joking?”

Instead of replying I nod at the apartment where he just emerged from.

“Is there anyone else still alive in there?”

“Yes. There are three… wounded!”

“We have to get out of here! And as soon as possible! They can return.”

The man nods. It seems that he agrees.

“Yes, but I can't leave my comrades... !”

“But we can't carry them.”

The USEC is shaking his radio in the air.

“Help! I reported the attack! We'll have help here soon!”

“How soon?”

He falls silent for a second, then brings the radio to his face.

“Red two, there is a group of six here. I'm asking for a connection!”

Alas, the unknown "red two" didn’t have good news, no one will be able to come to us before morning. No matter how much my new buddy tried to convince him, the answer was the same—it’s too dangerous, no one will go at night. We should strengthen our position and wait.

“Yeah... I'm sorry! It's going to be hard for you…”

“And you are? Leaving?”

“I've already gotten into someone else's kitchen. These people," I nod on the bodies in capes, "are very vindictive. And soon they will come again to avenge their comrades. I don't want to be here when that happens…”

He doesn't even understand what I'm saying right away. During the conversation I don’t forget to loot the bodies on the floor, liberating them from everything that could come in handy to me. It's not like they're packed with tons of cool stuff, but they have some useful stuff. It's obvious

that the USECs must have something worthwhile, but I strongly doubt my new friend would like that.

“No, my friend. I helped you, but sitting here until morning... it's not a good idea. By the way! Did you bandage your comrades?”

The man slaps himself on his forehead with a very Russian gesture, and disappears in the doorway. That's good... while he's bandaging, I'll quietly run away. Only first I’ll check the body of the sentry. He definitely has a night vision system, which is expensive, and you can sell that to any trader!

There was much more than just a night vision system, and my inner hoarder was sobbing, because I simply could not carry all the good stuff I found in the house. But greed leads to poverty. And in this situation, potentially to the grave!

It is time to leave!

But after only a few meters I stop.

From somewhere below I can hear the steps. Quiet and careful, but I can hear them very well. Well fuck…

Shouldn’t have spent so much time searching that foreigner! I could have run away a long time ago...

What's the point of regret now, though?

I run upstairs like a bullet.

A rifle barrel immediately pops out of the doorway, followed by its owner.

“What is it?”

“They came! They came, downstairs!”

Now that's what an experienced soldier looks like!

The man is instantly transformed. Gathered, concentrated.

“How many of them are there?”

“Now that’s the million-dollar question! How would I know? I just heard steps…”

But really, how many are there? Well… in principle, there’s no real limit. Apparently I did not collapse the tunnel.

Stop!

The tunnel... no. Something else...

“Any grenades?”

“A few.”

Briefly explain my idea. The man nods, he gets it! I pick up an assault rifle from the floor, check the magazine: loaded. Grab a couple more spare magazines from the pockets of the former owner.

“Ready!” The USEC is already on the stairs between the floors.

Click, and a grenade flies down the stairwell.

Ba-boom!

Gunshots rattle from below, our greetings were obviously not taken kindly. I hang over the railing and fire a whole magazine. I don't try to hit anybody, just shoot at random. And there probably isn’t anyone foolish enough to run ahead without thinking. But they’ll have to jump side to side, that’s for sure!

The second magazine.

They don't even try to shoot back from below, the chances of hitting are zero. But I keep shooting, taking short breaks between the bursts.

The third magazine...

“Let's go! Let's go!” I feel a slap on my shoulder.

And now we’re away!

Just as we fall on the floor, there’s an explosion downstairs... A big one. Smoke and dust covers all the floors. Visibility, already pretty shit, is reduced to almost zero, even the night vision doesn’t help. Something rattles, cracks, it’s almost like the walls are shaking. No, not almost, I hear a powerful impact below. I hang over the edge of the railing and turn on my flashlight. Yes... make a fool pray to God and he’ll break his head...

No idea how much and what the USEC put there. But the whole flight of stairs has fallen down, and now, in its place, there’s just a big hole. It is still possible to go down. But getting up, especially under fire, that can go south very fast!

“Go drag your guys upstairs. We’re on the third floor, so the fourth floor will be great. They can come in through the roof too, so we have to watch the stairs coming down.”

“Yes, sir! It will be necessary to break the locks on the doors and open them, so that they can’t silently climb through the balconies or windows of apartments close to the other entrance. That way I will hear them.”

“Do we still have grenades?”

The man shows me a bag half full of deadly gifts.

“So go put some traps on those windows and balconies or something. Do I

have to teach you, or what?"

Yes, that would be quite strange!

"Then look after the wounded, I will carry them upstairs later. First I have to prepare everything…" The man disappears upstairs, like he was never here.

It's still relatively quiet downstairs, although there's still some movement. The dust settles and the fracture that replaced the collapsed stairs becomes visible. But it's impossible to get from the second floor to the third. Jumping that distance, especially since you have to go up too, is not a good idea. About an hour passes. Nobody bothering us yet, we can't hear any shots or other suspicious noises. Yes, all kinds of rustling and grinding sometimes coming from below, but no one in sight yet.

The dude is rushing back and forth like he's a wind-up toy. He spent half an hour doing his magic somewhere upstairs, then came downstairs and dragged his injured comrades somewhere else. These actions didn't go unnoticed, and below shotguns ring out, with some automatic fire to boot. They had a plan with that. The bullets, ricocheting from the walls and stairs, reached our floor, sometimes getting into what seemed like sheltered places. I had to reply with fire, and a few minutes passed in an intense shootout, which I didn't think did any damage. But the ricochets stopped, which was pretty good.

But my mood didn't get any better. Since the villains down there were so stubborn, it's doubtful they would be stopped by an obstacle as simple as a collapsed staircase. They had to come up with something! From below I smell smoke. Smoke?!

That's right, I can hear the crackling of fire too!

Yeah, they're trying to smoke us out of here!

You're welcome to try, there's almost no glass left in the windows, and the

smoke will bellow out in every direction at once. Yes, it will be very uncomfortable, but not deadly. Somehow we'll get through it. But climbing into a smoking building from the street... well, well, I'll see what comes out of that.

I hear steps, my temporary ally descends from above.

“What happened?”

I explain my assumptions to him, pointing to the broken windows.

The USEC nods, he understands me.

“By the way, what is your name?”

“Eugene. Eugene J. Morlow, second class operator. Detachment B-2.”

“Denis. Vortex, I work for the Predator. Nice to meet you!” I extend my hand to him.

“Predator? That’s a movie! Schwarzenegger!”

“Hmm. Our sad reality is so terrible that it’s worse than any movie,” I say in Russian. Then add in English: “The sad reality means no movie!”

The dude’s smiling. It's strange to see a smile like that on a dirty, blood-soaked face.

Bam!

Something makes a noise upstairs.

Eugene is instantly on his feet.

“The fifth floor! Grenade!”

Okay, so some kind of trap on the fifth floor went off. In an instant he disappears upstairs. Well, I assume he's got more than one grenade there, he had half a bag filled with the things.

The villains turned out to be quite resourceful! They lit a fire to draw attention downstairs, and at the same time someone came through the roof. Cunning devils! It's a good thing that there's only one way up in these buildings, through the next entrance. There is no hatch in our entrance, or they would have tried to get in that way. Well, if that's the case, we shouldn't expect anyone from downstairs. There's smoke, visibility is almost non-existent, and everything is shot through from above. Boom! I get smashed against the wall, and not for the first time today! Not too bad, but definitely hurts, the motherfucker. But the noise came from the very apartment where the USECs were originally! And if Eugene hadn't dragged his comrades out, they would have been dead right there too! Did they throw some shit in from the street or something?

I turn over and use my hands to help sit myself up against the wall. I pick up my submachine gun. I'll wait to get up in case something else explodes. Will I have to polish the floor with my back again? But there are no more explosions. But there is some noise. Knocks, rustles... Voices?!

I don't remember anything happening to me that would cause me to hallucinate! That's definitely a voice! And not just one. From the very room where the explosion just happened. What an interesting explosion! Did they also throw in some people after the bomb? I highly doubt that it's dead people sharing their impressions of the explosion. So it was probably just a wall getting blown up! From the next entrance to the building. And now they are observing the results of their work. Well, yeah, it's not clear why this dead person is dead, an explosion or a bullet? But the door to my left is open. Who opened it and why isn't that important. But not to take fate's gift would be extreme idiocy. I roll and I'm already behind the partition. The door opens out and, being partially open, covers me a bit. And besides, there's more than one body lying here, to figure out who really died and who is pretending wouldn't be easy.

I didn't have to wait long, a sadly familiar silhouette in a cape appeared in the door opening. Watchful, weapon ready. But after looking around the floor the dude moved quickly and took aim at a staircase going upstairs. Got it, now they will rush up, kill Eugene and carefully check all the bodies. Dead, alive, their own, or opponents, they don't care. And if you're unlucky enough to still be living when they search you... no, fuck thinking about that, it's too nasty. Of course I can risk it and get out of here the way they entered, through the hole in the wall. When all this chaos starts upstairs I doubt they will cover the rear as well. But who's to guarantee that no one will be there?

No, fuck that shit!

Carefully, trying not to make any noise, I put my guns aside and pick out a grenade from my pocket. Got it... now the second one...

In the meantime there's more people arriving, three more of them came out of the door. They don't make much noise, they move quietly. Either they're trained well, or they're inherently smart guys who understand, fuck if I can tell.

Okay, the second grenade is in my hand.

Carefully unbend the safety pin. Done, now for the other one.

Suddenly, shots are clicking dryly upstairs at the top, and the leader of the villains waves his hand, raising his team to attack.

If you say so!

And the green sphere rattles on the floor.

I roll behind the partition and launch the second grenade along the ground. Catch!

Shouldn't forget to open my mouth, my ears have already had enough...

Boom!

There's some shit falling from the ceiling, and there's a few voices screaming behind the door. What, didn't get everybody in there? Get up!

I kick open the door slammed shut by the explosion and shoot. Right in front of me is a man with a bloody face, he's on his knees. I jump to the left, slip, but I manage to pull the trigger, and another opponent is sliding down the wall. But he has a shotgun in his hands, which sucks! It didn't get everybody, and some even managed to come to their senses! Or is just that not everybody made it out to the stairwell? I fire the rest of the magazine into a door, someone screams behind it immediately. That fire wasn't for nothing! Change the magazine, then roll, and again bullets knock out pieces from the door. The door almost falls apart after I kick it, but it opened. I throw another grenade into the room where the wounded were recently laying. I only have one left.

Boom!

A burst makes holes in the smoke. Bullets hit something with a squeal and ricochet.

Change the magazine, the last one I have.

In the smoke I can see a glimpse of light, I have to assume it's the hole made by the explosion they came in through.

And that's where I chuck the last grenade.

I pick up a shotgun and an assault rifle as I get up from the floor, and tear off a belt with pouches from a dead man, then run to the stairs.

"Eugene! Don't shoot, it's me!"

I fall on the floor and drop the trophy weapons next to me.

The USEC is completely calm.

“What happened?”

I explain the situation to him.

“There were a lot of bandits?”

“About ten people. Everyone is lying there.”

Morlow looks at me with respect. Nods.

“They also tried to get in through the balcony. One person remained in the room, and three others fell down.”

What a diplomatic way of putting that. They fell… Their arms, you see, got tired.

“Do you have grenades?”

He nods again and drops a few on the floor.

“Is that enough? I have to put some traps upstairs…”

I pat him on the shoulder and remove the cognac flask from my belt.

“Drink!”

That doesn’t need translation…

Nothing happens for about an hour. Taking turns, we drag the wounded into the corner room on the fourth floor. You can't get in here from the roof, and there is no wall touching the next entrance, so nothing to punch a hole in. We fill the staircase leading down with a large pile of chairs. Getting through this barrier on the way up is no easy task! You have to

jump higher than a kangaroo! And even that doesn't guarantee anything…

We try to do the same with the stairs leading to the fifth floor, but with less success, we run out of chairs! Too bad! This barricade can stop someone from walking or crawling, but not from looking and shooting. During a temporary break, I reload the submachine gun magazines. It's great that there's suitable ammunition in the pockets of the dead, although not much. Seeing this, Eugene leaves and in a couple of minutes places a few boxes of ammunition in front of me. A gift!
I notice a familiar label on the submachine gun, ZIG again! A tough outfit, I must say… they make quality guns! Well, a ZIG, a KS and a trophy assault rifle with two spare magazines, not a bad arsenal! By the way, the trophy gun has a more serious cartridge, a 7mm. So it'll go through the barricade like it's a piece of paper. Having examined this weapon, Morlow brings an assault rifle from above and offers an exchange with a gesture. Well, he's a smart guy, he probably knows how to use the specific rifle I have. The new rifle has more cartridges, six spare magazines. With a clear conscience I make the exchange, and the satisfied USEC runs upstairs. Ten minutes later shots rattle, and immediately a dozen guns hit the walls and windows. To no avail, none of us get close to the windows. And the bullets that ricochet from the ceiling won't hit a person lying under a wall, if you knew physics you'd know that! The angle of incidence equals the angle of reflection! After a while, a satisfied Eugene comes to me.

"They tried to make on the balcony... er… a refuge... shelter! To shoot from there. But this weapon easily breaks through wood...! They are not feeling good now."

Yes, I can imagine! Someone must have 'fallen' off the balcony again.

For a while there is silence again.

Bad luck, we turned out to be some very violent prey! According to my conservative estimate, there are already about two dozen dead attackers, so there's certainly no reason to feel good. But it seems to me that this is a matter of principle now, we will be beaten, by any means necessary!

But how?

They already tried to set fire to us. Blow us up?

Only together with the house...

A sniper? But we barely show up in the windows.

Any attempts to climb through balconies and roofs ended poorly for the enemy. And the passageway in the wall did not bring any pleasure either, ending in heavy losses. Repeating this trick for the second time is useless, because now we are waiting for it. Morlow's traps have already proved their effectiveness, so surprises like that could be anywhere. And our enemies understand that. The storm will inevitably result in losses, and quite possibly heavy losses too.

“Drink?” My ally pushes at my shoulder.

Well, there's still enough for a couple of sips in there.

Suddenly the radio on his IIFS comes to life. Eugene picks up the transmitter happily. I didn't understand half of what was said. Something Charlie, Alpha whatever and other exotic words fell like peas from a sack. But judging by the excitement of my comrade-in-arms, he got good news.

“Half an hour!” He excitedly slams me on the shoulder. “We just have to be here for another half an hour!”

Yeah?

Everyone present can be shot to shit within five minutes. But it’s not like there’s any other options, so I support the USEC.

“You should tell your comrades, it will cheer them up.”

He nods and goes into the room where we have placed the wounded.

I am sitting on the floor.

Something is crackling, clinking in the building, making a lot of noise. Whether it's someone crawling or just drafts moving all sorts of trash around on the floor is impossible to tell!

There are no specific villains yet. Smoked gun barrels do not appear out of doorways, and there are no attackers in the windows. Well, guys that rappel down from up high, even from the twenty-fifth floor, do exist. I've seen it on TV more than once! Why wouldn't these numbnuts try that too?

I wait…

I'm placing grenades on the floor, five overall, Eugene's got the rest of them set up somewhere. He's got a couple more on his belt and that's our entire supply. It's okay, we can stop the first wave. But the second one, I'm not sure! We are not the only ones with grenades.

"Hey!"

I don't understand where it's coming from right away...

"Hey, you! Upstairs!"

"What do you want?"

"We need to talk."

"Talk, I'm listening."

"It won't work that way. I have to see you!"

So fucking stubborn...

“Come out. Alone and without a gun. You can see me then.”

“You get down here too.”

“Fuck that! You said you wanted to see me, not hold my hand.”

Morlow showed up next to me, looking puzzled. I put my finger to my lips —stay quiet!

“Okay. I'm coming.”

I wonder where he will emerge from?

But the parliamentarian, as if nothing had happened, quietly goes up the stairs. Huh... but the stairwell collapsed? Did he fly?

The man really is alone, no one near him. He doesn't have any weapons either. He throws back the hood, exposing his shaved head.

“I am here.”

I climb up from behind the barricade, leaving my weapon on the floor and showing my open palms.

“And I'm here. As promised, without a gun.”

My opponent shows his empty hands too, as if replying.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“Denis. I work for the Predator. Who do I have the honor of talking to?”

“Brother Peter. A priest.”

Holy shit, I'm sorry, who? And what religion still has priests? Apparently, my confusion is visible, and the other person smiles.

“No, I'm not joking.”

“Um... and where is your church?”

The parliamentarian frowns.

“Don’t act a fool!”

“Nothing of the sort. It’s just that… do priests still exist?”

“We do. We have Soldiers and Priests. We do not need a church, a true Witness has a temple in his soul!”

“Wait a minute…" Out of the corner of my eye, I notice that Eugene picked up his radio, unscrewed the volume control. After that he crawled carefully to the side so that the parliamentarian couldn’t hear him. Yeah, so we're being called! Let's drag it out!

“So. One moment!” I raise my hand in a soothing gesture. “Priests, got it, I see one in front of me. Soldiers... well, I think I can see those too. But can you be more specific, what did you witness? Are you Jehovah's Witnesses?”

Brother Peter screws up his face.

“We do not do charlatanism. And we do not fool anyone. We are Witnesses to the Coming. And we are waiting for the true masters of this world.”

“How long do we have to wait?”

“Have you seen the Blue Flame?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Should I have?”

“So you are unlucky…” The priest shakes his head solemnly. “Those that saw, most of them started to believe! Many came to us that day!”

“And when was that?” I am sincerely surprised. “I have never heard of such a thing…"

“There was a blue flame…" The parliamentarian almost sings this out. “And there was an instruction from above to all unbelievers—reject your delusions! Your newfangled gadgets will not work, and your ears will become open so you may listen to the voice of those who know!”

“And then something broke out, and connectivity went out. Mobile phones stopped working, on the radios we only heard people that were very close.” My friend, a traffic cop said something like that too! Ivan definitely said something like that!

The monotonous words of the parliamentarian sound in my ears, he’s explaining something and calling me to do something. Shit, he knows how to talk! And convince. I was falling into his groove. I bend my finger, scratch my palm with a fingernail, and everything immediately becomes normal. An old trick. You can also step on your own foot. I was told about such things, a tried and tested sectarian trick! There are masters, if you don't stop them, they will wrap you around their fingers with their words!

The priest continues to speak, but his words no longer affect me. That’s the thing... just fall for it for a moment and that’s it.

But at some point he seems to notice that his propaganda has not been successful and changes tactics.

“You and your comrades (oh, so he doesn't know how many of us are here!) will continue to resist?”

“Is there an alternative?”

He thoughtfully looks at me.

“There is... There always is... Those who become aware of the malignancy of

their mistakes in the right time can come and join us. Keep in mind that we do not take everyone!"

"So what can we count on then? We leave and you just say, sorry, you don't fit our corporate culture."

The priest smiles. Barely noticeable, the smile only just slightly touches the corners of his lips.

"We know how to appreciate brave fighters. Not everyone who comes to us deserves the honor of becoming a soldier. Everyone starts with obedience, and only then, when everything is appreciated and weighed, the elders show everyone their Way."

"So, what, one might have to be obedient all their life?"

The parliamentarian nods.

"Yes. You could become a Soldier, you could become a Priest, but this is the way of a few. But everyone will be saved!"

"And what is waiting for us?" I am stalling with all my might!

"Soldier. You deserve this honor, and I am ready to admit this fact."

"And if someone disagrees?"

"With the decision of the Priests?" He is sincerely surprised. "You are too influenced by the old notions…"

He turns to the side and makes a sign. A big guy rises to the platform, heavily walking up the stairs. In the ubiquitous cape with an assault rifle behind his back.

My leg immediately pulls a weapon lying on the floor closer.
"Tell me, Brother Gregory, who are you among the Witnesses?"

“A Soldier!”

“Who commanded over this operation?”

“I did, Brother Peter.”

“How come you could not defeat so few people? Whose fault was is it that our brothers died?”

“It's my fault, Priest! I underestimated my opponent! They were skilled fighters.”

The parliamentarian sadly presses his lips and nods. He moves his cape to the side. Whoa, whoa, whoa! He has a very familiar knife there!

Which, with an unshaking hand, the priest sticks right into the belly of his companion! Strangely enough, the guy didn’t even change his expression. He did not scream, did not wave his arms and legs, just stood silently while blood flowed down his legs. Even after Brother Peter pulled out the blade the soldier continued to stand in the same place. He just rocked back and forth for a bit. Then… then his legs trembled, and he broke down. He fell to the floor, jerked a couple of times, and that's it.

Fucking hell…

“And you still think someone's going to challenge my decisions?” the priest asks ingratiatingly.

“Yeah… hardly…”

“See!” He smirks. “You have a chance. One! You, or at least most of you, can become Soldiers. Immediately bypassing obedience. You'll discover a lot of things! Pain, fear, and other human weaknesses will no longer dominate you. They are not worthy of scaring a true Witness.”

Yeah, not that's a fucking suggestion. And he's not lying! Brother Gregory did not scream or twitch in pain. Anyone else, they drop a frying pan on your foot and jump up to the ceiling. Not this dude. And he couldn't help but realize that he was being killed! But he stood there and died in silence.

Terrifying...

So, that's how the man was pinned to the fence... it makes sense he didn't twitch.

“Five minutes.” The parliamentarian sums up the conversation. “There will be no assault—we will shoot the building with rocket-propelled grenades. A few grenades go in the windows and the ceilings will collapse. You won't do us any harm.”

“We have wounded…”

“So what's your point?”

“They didn't hear you say anything. And I need time to tell them everything. Everyone has to make their decision consciously!”

“Okay," the priest nods. “Twenty minutes. Do you have a watch?”

“Yes, I do.”
“Note the time…”

After the footsteps subside I turn to Eugene. He just peeked out from behind the door of the nearest apartment.

“Any good news?”

“Our guys are coming! They're almost here!”

“Will they make it in twenty minutes?”

“Why twenty?”

I inform him about the situation, the guy turns pale and grabs his radio. For three minutes he tries to convince somebody, then he stops talking and sits down to the floor next to me.

“They will try to make it…”

“Yeah? Well, we'll... wait.”

It's a pity there isn't any more cognac. I take the watch off my hand and put it so that the dial is visible to both of us. We are in no hurry. There's a tiny chance we can kill the dude with the grenade launcher. At least one of them, because we simply can't control every side. And besides, no one is stopping the sectarians from shooting from behind any sort of shelter, because this wouldn’t require any real accuracy. Any gunner can put a grenade in a window from fifty meters! And we do not need that much. The house is old, several explosions will make it collapse.

I could go look out the windows to see what’s happening... but the snipers! We’d only save them a few grenades...

It's been ten minutes.

The sun is rising… the outlines of the surrounding buildings are becoming distinguishable. No people can be seen nearby, but that does not mean anything. Our opponents aren't insane enough to stroll around under the windows.

“How many of them are there, I wonder?” I nod to the stairwell full of dead bodies.

“Right here?”

“No... in general. There,” I point upstairs, “I’m pretty sure some were killed there too?”

“Ah…" The USEC agreed. “Well... I suppose that no less than twenty people! Some must have been wounded…”

“Then we sold our lives at a high price!”

One to two at least! An aggressive prey they found! But the knife I took from one of the dead Priests earlier... It would be smart to hide it somewhere. I'm sure these villains are still looking for the dude that killed their priest in the dungeon, and then took his knife. When they see I have it… No, I shouldn't surprise them like that!

Although, if we count only me and Eugene as active participants, the result could turn out quite offensive to the sectarians.

Looking at the clock, I turn it face down. There's nothing more to see here...

Eugene gets up, checks his rifle.

“I'll go to the guys, they'll feel better if they see me around.”

“Good! Well, I'll wait here for now. These dudes went up the stairs, didn't they? So anything is possible. And they can also get through the breach in the apartment.”

He pats my shoulder in a friendly manner.

“You're a good dude, Denis! Maybe we can have a drink together sometime?”

The steps of the USEC fade upstairs and I move along the wall so that I can control the stairwell downstairs.

One more minute...

Boom!

Some dust and pieces of plaster fall on my head…

The grenade exploded upstairs, maybe on the fifth floor. The ringing glass, crackling... something fell. The blast wave pushes me into my back.

That's the first... now they're going to hit lower. And then that's it...

Run upstairs?

And if the second one goes there too? We're not fighting the dumbest people, they could have taken that into account.

The second grenade also exploded upstairs.

They have one shooter!

Most likely, that's the reason for the pause between the shots.

But I'm thinking that while I'm already running. My own guns, the rifle, the ammunition from Morlow, I'm not setting any sprinting records. No one would expect someone to run back to the place where two explosions went off. I want to believe that my enemy thinks in a similar way!

Suddenly the light hits my eyes!

There is a big piece of wall missing, and in its place is a big hole! This is where the first rays of the rising sun break through. Dust is beautifully flowing, sometimes taking on very strange shapes.

Jesus fucking Christ, the bullshit that comes into my head...

I look into the hole.

And here's the shooter!

He's not even hiding, his head down, reloading.

Fucking A... and the damn bastard is not even afraid!

I raise my rifle. It's equipped with some newfangled sight so I can see the target relatively well. But it's better to turn off automatic fire! If you shoot in bursts, more bullets will fly out, but the issue is where they will fly to... that's the question! Holding my breath, I align the marker with the target. Shit, I have to make some calculations to correct for the distance. I didn't shoot this weapon too much, who the fuck knows where and how the bullets fly at this distance? It's not that far away, a hundred meters or so. It would be easier with the usual KS. And with my sniper rifle it'd have been a dream! But I don't have my sniper rifle. And the KS at such a distance would still scatter bullets like a pissing bull! The imported rifle has better accuracy, no matter what anyone says.

A shot!

Missed, obviously...

Shot, shot, shot!

Got him!

Not too badly, apparently, the man just grabs his shoulder, but he drops his grenade launcher. The ominous weapon falls to the ground.

Shot, shot!

The motherfucker got away…

I fire the rest of the magazine at the grenade launcher. I doubt it'll explode, but there's still a chance that something will break. There is also a sight, why not try to break it?

People come to their senses, they fire at the building from all directions.

Bullets whiz by near my position. I'm lucky dust hangs in the air... no smokescreen needed! I can't even be seen. It's true that I can't see very well from here either, that's how the shooter got away! But I'm hiding behind the wall, fuck stupid risks! It is not a game or a movie, that's where you can jump under fire with impunity. Here, an idiot like that would be dead in a moment!

I change the magazine and look out carefully.

Well fuck... they picked up the grenade launcher!

It's a pity, of course, but I still managed to claw back like ten minutes of my life!

Well, where is someone feeling very arrogant? I have a full magazine here!

I see some movement around a heap of garbage, so I spray a dozen bullets in that direction right away. No regrets, you can't take your ammo to the grave!

Shots are echoing from nearby houses, about two dozen guns are going off at once!

"Denis! Don't shoot! Shoot no! This is for us!" Eugene runs from below, shaking his radio in the air.

So they came?

Chapter 12

“Whiskey?” The USEC commander removes the tactical helmet from his head and puts it on the table.

“I’d rather have cognac... used to it, you know…”

“Willy! Cognac for our guest!”

Yeah, so he sent some Willy to bring cognac. Well, if he did, means he has some. I never took to whiskey. I don't like this imported moonshine. Many people like this taste, but not me, my body just does not agree with it.

“Eugene told me…" He looks at me questioningly. “About you, I mean. And he said some strange things…”

“Like what?”

He speaks Russian fairly well, but the slight accent gives away that he’s a foreigner. In general, the dude looks like he’s from the Baltics. At least he looks like how movies show dudes from the Baltics.

“Ah, yes! I haven't introduced myself…”

Yeah, we were busy...

When a group of Morlow's comrades-in-arms crashed through the entrance, rattling their boots and pointing various guns in all directions, one of them almost shot at me. After I saw my reflection in the mirror, I’m not at all surprised. A guy in strange clothes, sprinkled with plaster and dust, an unkind grin on his soot-covered face is unlikely to make anyone feel good. I wouldn’t mess with me. And if my buddy hadn't turned from around the corner, looking not much different to me, then there would have been a shootout... But Eugene yelled at full volume and the situation became less tense. They didn't even take my guns from me or search my

backpack. But they were openly watching me.

I get it.

Five of Morlow's men were dragged out of the building dead, and three wounded, the losses were very substantial! So the USECs certainly had nothing to be happy about.

Yes, they picked up a pretty good pile of trophies, but I strongly doubt that this could somehow compensate for their dead comrades-in-arms.

Since there was no desire on anyone's part to continue hanging out here, waiting for someone else to come to the sounds of shots fired, the packing didn't take too long. No one thought to ask me if I wanted to go along with them to the base, they just nodded at my place in the column and that's it.

They wouldn't let me pick through the pile of trophies. They said the commander didn't allow it.

Although I did manage to squirrel away one thing.

Passing by a pile of dead bodies—the USECs threw them all in one place—I asked my escort:

"Can I take this?"

"What?"

"Souvenir!"

Upon seeing where I was pointing, the attendant just shrugged his shoulders.

"No problem…"

So I got a second knife on my waist, very similar to the one already there.

But I couldn't talk to their commander then, the man was very busy.

They took me to a room at the base and showed me where I could wash my face and clean my clothes. While I did that, a standard army meal and a can of Coca-Cola appeared on the table, indicating I could eat. But I couldn't leave, there was a sentry at the door. He did not engage in any conversation, with a gesture suggesting I back up.

Well, if that's the case...

Upon eating half of my ration I fell on the bed without undressing. I'll take a break...

However, it wasn't possible to sleep for long. A couple of hours later they gently knocked on the door. A dude in camouflage showed up on the doorstep and invited me to follow him to the commander.

"I am the deputy sector commander of B-3, Charles Honer. And what would your name be?" My escort tilts his head.

"Denis, Vortex."

"Which group do you belong to? Bears? Scavs?"

I don't know what kind of military specialist you are, but you aren't that great at fooling people. This art was clearly not taught properly! Or he's not adapting his act to our local culture, that's also fairly possible. Obviously they were not taught to ask the locals the right questions...

"Didn't Morlow tell you anything?"

"He is shell-shocked…"

I believe that. There were a lot of explosions!

So, dear comrade, you doubt the words of your subordinate...

“I don't belong to these groups. I work for the Predator.”

Honer smiles.

“That’s a movie character! I’m asking a serious question!”

“You know, I'm not really in the mood for jokes either. You don’thave to believe me. I don't insist. And I'm not going to abuse your hospitality any longer.”

“It's evening! It's getting darker! And you want to leave the base at this time? Alone?”

“I mean I stumbled on your comrade too. At night, actually…”

The officer is smiling—I can’t be intimidated by the prospect of walking alone at night. But he is relentless and attempts to probe me further. The man openly does not believe in the Predator and considers all my hints as just fairy tales. Either you give him something real and concrete, or...

“You've got some pretty good equipment. But this is not uncommon in this situation. You have experience in urban warfare, Morlow made a note of that. However, this is not that hard to learn. Your past... maybe we should we look there?”

Fuck that!

Tell him everything?

And the guys that “cleaned up" (this is how these kinds of people speak, right?) all the peoplethat worked with me at the sanatorium, where did they come from? If USEC had nothing to do with that, then I’m the pope! Somebody knew exactly what was going on there, so why couldn’t the dude sitting in front of me know too? No, I'll not get into any revelations.

“My past place of work has nothing to do with what is happening on the streets now.”

Wow, how I worded that! I am proud of myself. If only I knew why he kept asking?

“But I was working with the Predator then too. Everything was done without war back then, or without shooting in any case.”

“And what were you doing then?”

Well, this information is absolutely useless to him, so I explain the principles of building a computer network to him in great detail. The dude gets bored, not his cup of tea.

“Okay, that I understand (yeah, don't piss in my ears!), but how can does your present flow from your past?”

“Everyone wants to live! So I had to remember the old skills.”

“Were you at war? Where?”

“In the army, where else? Thank God I wasn't just a cook there.”

Yeah, I sat in headquarters all the way. But that’s not written on my forehead!

An officer raises his eyebrow in surprise.

“The Predator somehow got access to my personal file and hit me up with a specific proposal. Ages ago…”

“And where did you live in the city?”

What kind of moron does he think I am? Didn't anybody tell you,dude, that you shouldn't underestimate your opponent? No way am I telling him

where I live.

So I give him the address of Vitka Gorobets, he left somewhere for treatment before this mess. But I watered the plants in his apartment. So I can describe the layout in detail.

Which I do... again, the man gets bored...

“Well... what do you do now?”

“Courier. Passing on information and orders. Well, sometimes I can carry something valuable. I will tell you right away, it’s through stashes and drops, I have no personal contact with anyone. I receive all orders by radio or through the stash.”

“Is that profitable?”

“Enough for me.”

The conversation has reached a dead end. No, I understand that there’s nothing preventing the other person from giving me a couple of solid slaps to make me more talkative. But so far he hasn't done so. And you can understand why. He needs allies, not some abstract information about someone he doesn't know. You have to use them for something, and for that you gotta figure out how! Suppose he finds out something about one of the groups, or a communication channel, what do you do with it? What I don't count on at all is a feeling of gratitude for the rescue of his fighters. Cynical, but I can understand the man. He's in a hostile environment, nobody here likes his guys much. They’re considered walking piñatas, full of all sorts of useful stuff.

“Have you managed to capture any prisoners?”

An officer raises his eyebrow in surprise.

“Yes. Why?”

“You wanna see an experiment?”

“What kind?”

“You need proof the Predator exists, don't you?”

“Well... not especially. I'm inclined to believe you anyways.”

Sure, man! Keep telling me stories!

“You tried to interrogate them, didn't you? And no one answered your questions?”

I'm taking a risk! What do I know about their interrogation skills? But... I have some thoughts.

“They were (ah, so more than one prisoner!)... not very talkative.”

Yes, I remember the conversation on the stairwell.

“The fact is that you are not an authority for them. And these people have some... uh... immunity to pain.”

“What do you suggest?”

Now that’s a conversation! Don't make a mistake!

* * *

The skinny guy who walked into the room wasn't paying attention to anyone. He looked at the wall and did not react to calls. The guards who pushed him in closed the door and stayed in the hallway. That's exactly what I asked them to do without revealing the true reason for the request. It's just… why should our dialogue, if it happens at all, be heard by anybody else? After all, there are many ways it could go...

“Don’t…" I touch Honer's sleeve. “I will ask you to step aside.”

I don't know what he thinks, but he steps aside. However, he unbuttons his holster demonstratively. Does he really think I'm going to make a deal with this man? Like organize an alliance against Charles? Like someone was stopping me from doing that in the building back during the firefight…

Icome closer and stop in front of the prisoner.

“Who are you among the Witnesses?”

And that’s when the prisoner turns to me.

His gaze instantly becomes far from indifferent! He looks at me, lowers his eyes...
And sees two very familiar knives on my belt.

“Brother Gennady, Priest!”

“Call me Brother Denis. Who are you among the Witnesses?”

“A novice!”

“There, behind me, is a lost soul. Tell him about us, let him believe. I want him to hear the truth from your mouth! He wants to hear the words of a regularWitness.”

“Yes, Brother!”

“And another thing. Tell him that the Predator's voice commanded you to speak to him. This is the way it should be!”

“I will say so!” There is a fanatical flame in the guy's eyes.

I turn to the officer.

“Charles, you wanted to talk to him.”

* * *

In half an hour, the door closes behind the prisoner.

A slightly overwhelmed officer pours himself a glass of cognac and chugs it.

“It's scary…”

“It's reality. And you will have to get used to it.” I don’t waste time and quickly pour some cognac for myself.

“It's easy for you to say!”

“I'm used to it... As you can see, the sectarians have no doubts about my patron!”

“Yes,” the officer nods. “I noticed that he takes you seriously. He was always looking your way. Like when I asked him a question, he said the Predator's voice told him to tell me the truth.”

I clink my glass and drink my shot. That’s a relief

It's good that it's a military man who's talking to me, not some cop or counterintelligence officer. They have a completely different way of thinking. And if my interlocutor was more interested in purely military issues, an experienced tracker would have clung to very different details! And then I would have been in trouble! Well, could have been in trouble.

“By the way, keep in mind that he will try to escape from you now.”

“Why?”

“The very fact that you are in contact with a representative of the Predator

is quite valuable information for his leaders."

"But you are just my guest!"

"I hope you have already explained this to him? And if so, do you think he believed you?"

Another shot of cognac, now we drink together.

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Well... I do have to get to one place…"

"My men will escort you out."

"Not to the gate. Out there… how can I put this gently... you are not too loved…"

"Does anyone in Tarkov even remember the meaning of that word?" Honer grins sadly. "They look at us only through a sight…"

* * *

Later, lying in my bunk, I try to remember what happened. Well... yes... I've stirred some shit! A pack of yeast in an outhouse toilet would be a fitting metaphor! I was asked about so many things! I didn't answer most of the questions, citing ignorance. They thought I was a small timer... A courier, he doesn't know much.

But the more pleasant part of the conversation was stored, as it is often happens, for later.

"You helped my people. And thanks to you I learned a lot from the prisoner. I don't want to look like a pig, so I'll ask!" The bottle was already almost empty…

“And?”

“How can I thank you?”

It’s understandable, in our current situation every team leader has to twist around to live an extra few days. So new contacts, no matter who they are with, will not be in vain.

* * *

But the rest of the way turned out to be much faster—a large group of well-armed people were not attracting anyone. Maybe someone looked out the windows, but not a single dog barked. So we got to the goalcalmly. But on the approach, we had to sit down sharply, there was some unpleasant movement at the object. So I stopped the group and asked Eugene to sit quietly on the spot.

“I’ll go there. We need to calm down the local inhabitants. They know me and won't shoot me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don't worry!” I slap him on the shoulder.

On the inside my nerves are shot! The people there were not very nervous... at least that’s what I think. And my face seems to be familiar to some locals. But anything can happen…

I walk along the road with my right hand up and I look around to see where to run if something happens. Nowhere is the answer. The local inhabitants are fairly smart, so all manner of holes are covered with garbage. And those natural shelters which still have some space, I'm going to visit them myself. I have some doubts about the forgetfulness of local mine planters. Surely there are some nasty explosive traps. No matter what, these aren’t very forgiving dudes. And if there is any shelter left, it certainly

has a good chance to quickly become a mass grave for unreasonable and arrogant smart guys.

I'm not allowed to reach the gate.

They shout twenty meters before I approach and suggestI put my weapons on the ground.

I don't argue, I put my ZIG and KS on the road.

"Should I put my pistol down too?"

In return, they only shrug.

Okay, let's not argue. I'm also putting my grenades on the ground! You didn't say anything about them at all, yet here they are!

"Now walk here!"

I squeeze between the concrete blocks. They immediately pat me down carefully and take away both knives.

"I would like to see Veremeev…"

"We'll let you know," the guard nods. "In the meantime, you sit over there…"

Near the gate is... the word slammer comes to mind, like in a jail. A grated bench that resembles lockup in a regular police station. Yes... these people are not too inventive. Another guard goes out beyond the gate and picks up my weapons. He brings them to the post and puts them in a safe on the floor.

By the way, quite a smart idea!

The box is on the ground, the hole where the safe door was, and around it

a pretty thick layer of dirt. If something explodes, all the energy of the blast will go upwards without hurting the guards. A local bomb squad wouldn't have thought of that! So sabotage through placing a bomb on the weapons you leave behind will obviously not work. So this is exactly where I need to be.

I cheer up a bit.

A few minutes later the local "boss" comes out from behind the corner of a house.

“You?”

“I don’t look like me?”

“You got thin…”

“Well, that's the kind of diet I’m on these days…”

“Give him his weapon back, he’s one of our own," the captain turns to the guards.

“He is not alone! There, behind the houses, there are USECs hanging out, they came with him!”

“Yes,” I confirm the words of the observant sentry. “These are my porters. If it is possible, give me someone to go with me and help carry the cargo. I suppose you don’t want them here, right?”

“I'll pass…” the captain mutters. “Like we need these kind of visitors... How did you get with them anyway?”

“Not me, the boss has some business with them. But these seem to be cool, don’t act out.”

“Don’t give a fuck, they shouldn’t be here.”

I don't argue: Veremeev is the boss, it's his call.

He calls a couple of guys from the shift, and we all walk to thehouses together.

My goods are transferred to my companions. The exchange is fast, despite the mutual distrust from both sides. Veremeev's guys walk back quickly.

“Well, that's it, Eugene, I'm going to stay here for a while. You can report to the commander that we have reached our destination without incident.”

Morlow looks at the fence with distrust.

“Well... do as you will... you shouldn't trust the people here, they're... very dangerous... there are all kinds of things here…”

“Where do you suppose I'll find normal people around here? I think that's all that's left... But the boss has business with them…" I shrug. “And I have to talk to their boss.”

He pats me on the shoulder.

“Good luck! And come and visit us!”

“Safe travels!”

The chain of soldiers disappears behind the houses and I hurry back to the gate.

“Sit down!” Veremeev nods at me. “What did you come here for?”

“Yeah, I have one question... You have all sorts of explosives experts here, don't you?”

“They could be found.”

“I want to learn. And not justexplosives. I’ve had a few too many bullets fly over my head as of late.”

The captain is surprised.

“What the hell do you need training for? Pay us and we'll protect you!”

“I wonder how I can call you if I am getting seriously hammered somewhere? Or do you have a helicopter laying around in your pocket?”

The local boss smirks.

“You're not a bad guy, of course, but…”

“I'll pay.”

“Really? Well... okay, then I'll call Korney…”

In short, we had a deal. Not right away, and not without curses, but I’m used to that now.

“This is the house,” I point on the map as I show them where I stashed my finds. “The second entrance, the first apartment on the left on the third floor. The door is broken, but that’s so no one goes in to look to see if there’s something valuable left there. The wardrobe is in the room on the right, you should move it away from the wall. There will be a stash there, two foreign assault rifles with ammunition and a couple of pistols. Under the tub in the same apartment are a couple of shotguns.”

“What kind of shotguns?” Demyanych asks. A local administrator, he is also in charge of commercial operations.

“That I can’t tell you... Murkas, most likely. What's in the warehouse is what they'll bring. But you understand there will be cartridges for these guns too.”

“Good!” He makes a note in his ledger. “What else?”

“That’s it! The rest only when we’re done. You should ask your boss about that... that’s what we agreed on.”

“Will there be any rifles with sights? Or just mass-market crap?”

“The agreement was that they’d have sights. Not optics, but as I understand it, they’re not used that often.”

“Well,”the administrator shrugs,“in our commune every nail has its hole!”

I don’t argue with this, the order at the former traffic copsplace is excellent, I saw it for myself.

The notorious Korney turned out to be a talkative man around forty years old. In the past, he was a member of the de-mining team, so he knew all sorts of tricks…

He started, as I expected, with the theory. But he didn't spend too long on it. Basically all his words could be reduced to a few specific points.

"There are no safe objects.”

"By putting your foot in an untested place you take the first step to the grave.”

"Don't believe anything until you check everything yourself!”

"The quickest way always ultimately leads to death.”

And a few more statements like that.

“You should never think of your opponent as a fool," my instructor says, rolling a rubber ball between his fingers. “They bury people that think that

way very quickly. If there's anything left to bury…"

As I look at the way his hands handle all sorts of deadly iron, I'm increasingly convinced that I've been lucky in the past for no good reason. Or were my opponents greedy with mines? By the way, when I told Korney about the tricky traps that the saleswoman's henchman set up for me, he nodded approvingly.

"That's a smart guy right there! It's a pity that such a specialist could be killed, he could be useful!"

"Well... I don't know... situation there can get touchy... And one could get really hurt. Or everyone…"

"Yeah, I get that!" He waves his hand. "What kind of life are we living, huh?! But if you see the guy, pass on my invitation!"

It sounds strange coming from his lips. Seeing my confusion, the instructor explains.

"It was an accident that you spotted his traps! Well, maybe luck was part of the equation. But the way he arranged everything there, it speaks in his favor! Judging by your words this one has a great head on his shoulders! Doesn't work according to a template, you know? Such guys, with a spark, are extremely rare. That's why the price is quite high for one of those! I would not have thought of that! And this dude…"

And our classes continue.

I mean I've read about trip-wires. And I saw them on the Internet. But I'm more partial to a rattling or clanking trap. I'm a little scared, to be honest. My hands do the actions needed, but somewhere in my chest something jumps. My mouth is dry... It's good that Korney had all sorts of learning grenades and fuses, now my evenings are full of training. I have something to use my hands on. My first experiments in this field were subject to merciless ridicule and humiliation. Let's be honest… I wasn't much of an

explosives expert. But in a couple of days the instructor is already nodding approvingly.

“Well, at least your head isn’t completely empty…”

I’ll take that! As far as I’ve heard,you need to jump higher than your own head to get any praise from him!

It's good for Veremeev’s guys, not only are the people experienced, but they’re also armed fairly well. They can support each other if necessary. But I am a loner. I can only count on me.

In a couple of days I inform the captain of the coordinates of the new hiding place with weapons and ammunition: the time has come to pay for school. So I have a few more days. Now I have to act my heart out. Once every two days I go beyond the fence and make a fool of myself, depicting a radio exchange with an unknown interlocutor. The theatre of one actor... So far it seems to work out, nobody suspects anything. Besides my engineering lessons (that’s what they call the explosive wisdom), I'm trained a little bit in shooting, which is also very useful. Just some basics. If this keeps up I’ll be able to think for myself, and that means life! Or, to be more precise, have a chance not to lose my life before the time comes.

Chapter 13

“And what wasso unusual about this guest of yours? Well, he’s wild... well-armed... so what?” Mark Forbett shrugged his shoulders after he listened to his companion.

“Sir…” Honer thinks for a while, trying to find the right words.“With all due respect, but you haven't seen him.”

Forbett wasn't Charles' direct supervisor. He hadn't actually held any big posts before. A coordination officer... not too big a deal!

Officially.

But knowledgeable people said that a lot of what the Joint Action Coordination Department was doing would have been called quite differently at other times.

Counterintelligence.

And the internal security service of the company.

Honer remembered several "sudden accidents" that happened to some arrogant people. Ones who suddenly decided that their position allowed them to ignore some instructions coming from the coordinators. No, of course, nobody slammed a gun on the table or frowned when someone didn’t agree.

"We believe that in the current situation such actions could have a positive impact on the development of events in the right direction…”

That's it. Short and simple. Gently hinted, tactfully advised... and who is to blame that it was so hard for you to understand? And if a person does not notice transparent hints and polite instructions, he could very well miss a drug addict with a knife right in his own home. And even with the

beginning of the mess happening now in Tarkov, Forbett's behavior hasn't changed much. He was still polite. But the place of addicts with knives has been taken by unknown shooters...

Mark sometimes appears at USEC bases. Not alone, accompanied by a group of well-armed and silent guys. Regardless of who was in command ofa group, and despite any bad relationships he might have with neighboring units, the people of Forbett were always provided with the most cordial welcome. They got everything that they demanded. They were provided support and escorted to the right places. Not out of fear or even a sense of responsibility. Why would they be scared of the distant leadership, they're far away. What does a person who can die any day from a bullet to the head from anywhere really have to fear?

No, Mark had another trump card.

Very often it happened that at the moment of especially dire need for something, one of Forbett's guys could speak a few words. They said that something like that could be found at a certain location. As a rule it would be there. And these places were often checked very thoroughly! But still... Sometimes a different thing happened. An unknown shooter, randomly, of course, suddenly would kill some particularly stubborn character. They could just wound him a little bit, or they could be more accurate…anything could happen. And not a lot was changed by the fact that the person shotwould be loyaland occupy a high position in the organization. There are some unwritten rules of conduct which shouldn't be neglected by anyone.

Charles had already caught himself thinking a couple of times that the chaos of the new reality didn't seem like a surprise to his companion. He remained too calm. It was as if he knew something that others had no idea about. He was never afraid of anything or anyone, and that was enough to make you think.

But that's Forbett. What do you want everyone else to do? Those who have no connection, no warehouses with food and weapons, how could they

survive? It's quite possible that the counterintelligence guy has some connection to the outside world, but he's in no hurry to share it with anyone. So you work how you can, scrounge for food, bullets, medicines, and all by yourself! And hope for something… anything

“Okay.”Mark nodded. “I didn't see him, that’s true. And what did you see in him?”

“Well… If you'll allow me, I'll start from the beginning.”

“That makes sense. I’m listening.”

“A group of my men, performing a regular changing of the guard at one of the sites that had survived, stopped to rest in an abandoned residential building. Subsequently the building was thoroughly examined, after the situation. It was found that two of the three entrances were deliberately set up in a condition that excluded the very possibility of even nominally comfortable accommodation.”

“I'm sorry, how does that work? Were the walls collapsed or something?”

“No. In the first entrance we found several dead bodies, which apparently were lying there for a long time. And the smell was… appropriate. For the same reason the second entrance didn’t work either.”

“Yeah… Well, not a bad idea!” Mark approved of the approach.

“In the third entrance almost all but one of the apartments had broken glass and broken doors. So the only apartment relatively suitable for rest was on the second floor. That's what my people did. Beforehand they inspected all the floors, there was nothing suspicious. And the door to the basement was locked from the outside.

“So there was a place specifically set up for rest?”The counterintelligence officer squinted.“Interesting… And who was this ambush designed for? For you?”

“I can't rule that out, we often follow this path. But usually the group arrives while it’s light out. And in this situation... someone fired on them while they were traveling, they had to defend and wait…”

“Any victims?”

“No, it went fine, no one was hurt.”

Forbett smiled.

“Let me interrupt you... A group of unknown people, having scouted your permanent route, organized a trap apartment on it. After that, they heldup the group with false shelling, which in turn compelled them to stop for the night. Since the choicesforresting were few and far between, your people entered the trap prepared for them. Is that right? Am I correct about the sequence of events?”

Charles sweats. It’s not like he didn’t think of that. But to openly admit that he was an idiot who was so easily fooled by some sectarians... You can say goodbye to that promotion!

“I can't rule out that possibility either..." he replied carefully.

“That possibility? Are there any other options for what transpired? I would be interested to hear them!”

The counterintelligence officer waved his hand.

“Whatever. We’ll talk about this later! Go on, what else?”

“The attack began when it got dark, the enemy came up from the basement floor. Apparently they somehow managed to open the locked door. As our guest also said so, he saw it open, but the lock was still locked. The door was opened without disturbing the lock, along with part of the door.”

“There were obviously not some simple guys! That doesn’t sound much like regular Scavs!”

“Yes, sir. They were some kind of sectarians.”

Mark sat up in his chair, interested.

“Well, well... More details from this point on, please!”

“Five people died in the shootout. Three people, including the commander, were wounded. The fight was led by Eugene J. Morlow, a second class operator, the only one who hadn't received any wounds by then. They had already been blocked in one of the rooms and there was little hope of survival.”

“Mm-hmm…”

“But suddenly the shots stopped and someone called to Morlow. He replied and was then offered the opportunity toexit the room, saying that there were no more enemies.”

“And?”

“There really weren’t any more people living, just the dead. Most of them were shot in the back or at point-blank range, Morlow is an old soldier and understands such things.”

“Did they let the enemy get close? Or was it their former comrade-in-arms?”

“No... This man was even dressed differently. All sectarians wear similar clothes. Fabric capes made of a dense fabric, a kind of uniform.”

“Yes," the man nodded. "I've heard of that too.”

“So!” Encouraged by the guest's words, Honer continued. “He used a silent

weapon, a ZIG submachine gun. Probably the same as ours. He came quietly from behind, threw grenades and shot the surviving sectarians at point-blank range."

"This Morlow of yours... did he negotiate with him?"

"Sir... He didn't have time for that! The three wounded demanded immediate care, there was complete uncertainty outside... He simply did not have time to do so."

"What do you mean?" The guest was amazed.

"The unknown ordered him to move the wounded to another room and bandage them, while he began to organize the defense by himself."

"And your man obeyed?!"

"At the moment it seemed like quite a reasonable idea. And I must say that the guest had indeed planned everything competently. Per his instructions, Morlow blew up the stairwell, thus significantly reducing the options of the attackers. By the way, this man earlier blew up the passage from where the sectarians had originally come from with grenades. Then... then there was a fight. By that time we had already begun to work on the rescue operation."

"It's not that important! What else did the operator say?"

"He was fighting on the top floors, the enemy tried to pass through the roof and balconies. At the same time they blew up an apartment wall downstairs and broke in through there as well."

"What interesting sectarians we have..." The counterintelligence guy smiled. "Like an elite assault unit!"

"They were not very lucky." Honer ignored the joke. "All those that broke through the wall never made it above the second floor. Our guest killed them all right there with grenades and point-blank shots."

“He has an unhealthy tendency to shoot at close range... Don't you think?”

“I do.” Charles replied quite seriously. “By the way, his pistol isn't that simple either, a ZIG-P220 with a silencer, like our control officers. Also not the most long-range weapon! He is obviously not an ordinary soldier, there is something else going on here…”

That's where the counterintelligence guy had to take some time to think! And for a while he sat silently, mulling over something. Then he raised his head.

“What's next?”

“He even knows how to speak to the sectarians, using their fear of his boss. Some Predator... For some reason they are very afraid of him.”

“How much?”

“The sectarian we had imprisoned answered my questions honestly. And he did not make the slightest attempt to evade or trick anyone.”

“Predator... no, I haven't heard of him! So, to summarize what you have just said. A well-prepared, well-equipped, cold-blooded killer. He prefers to shoot up close and fatally. Did I miss anything?”

Honer looked at his guest with respect.

“Wow… I didn't consider him from that point of view! He didn't make that impression on me, but... Yes, you're right, Denis…”

“Who?”

“He introduced himself as Denis. He reminded me of some IT guy, or an engineer. This guy didn't look like a cold-blooded killer. But he's in a good relationship with a gang of former traffic cops in the warehouses.And they

wouldn't let any civilian come in! These guys are serious thugs!"

"I know…" the guest agreed. "We know these people well. Tell me, do you have any line of communication with this Denis?"

"Yes, when I asked him how I could express my gratitude for his help he asked me to pass it through one of the traders, the Khokhol. Through him you can find Denis himself or his boss."

"So the merchant knows this dude…"

"The Predator? Yes, as far as I understand, he does."

"And he didn't tell us anything about it? Hmm…"

It was Charles' turn to be surprised. So Forbett has contacts with this tricky dick? Interesting... and he didn't say anything about that! But the deputy sector commander didn't say that out loud, there is no need to show your emotions to this complex man.

"As I understand it, you can also contact these people through two other traders: Prapor and…" Honer stopped to think. "This dude... he hangs around the customs area…"

"I know Prapor," the counterintelligence man nodded. "And the customs... You mean the drug dealers?"

"Yes. This man has many names. The Hood, Dealer... it is quite possible that there are other nicknames."

Mark thoughtfully rubbed his chin.

"This isn't good! Somewhere in the city there is a man, or rather a group of men, well known to the traffickers, but somehow missed by us. It shouldn't happen like that! We have to keep our finger on the pulse, that's the key to our survival here! If we miss something it could be our last mistake! And

for us every day is important! Here's what, Charles... I'd appreciate it if you could find out more for me, what kind of new players have appeared on our map?"

"And you don`t need to know anything about the sectarians?" The thought flashed in Honer's head: "What interesting things are happening here…"

"Yes, sir! I will immediately take all measures to find out everything possible about these people, as soon as possible."

Chapter 14

Click!

Shit!

Distracted again...

“If I'd demanded a glass of vodka for every fuckup, I'd be fucking smashed,” Korney grunts. “Tell me please, how shouldI get everything into your head? Should I use a brick? Or will you need something more thorough?”

It's easy for him to be sarcastic... he must have spent half his life doing all sorts of nasty things! And I’ve been studying for less than a week, and I’m supposed to know everything!

The bomber mercilessly makes me learn. I’m beyond tired. But I am silent and I am not talking back, because he is right after all. In real life, my guts would be hanging out on some wires. Or on the nearest fence. Like, who would have thought that even a regular grenade can be set up in so many different ways? I thought, like the simpleton I am, that regular trip-wires were the only option…There could be a few options, but so many? The lever setup, as it turned out, had several different execution options. And I, the fool that I am, was proud... If there was something to be proud of! I found one such grenade, purely by chance, and on the inside I was proud!

Yeah...

I'll live longer if I'm more modest!

The only joy was the shooting lessons, they were a little easier. It's obvious that I can't become a sniper, but I don't want to be a sniper. I already get decent results from the pistol and the assault rifle, and my instructor nods approvingly. With a shotgun I’m actually good! The distances are small, and

buckshot doesn't travel far. And a shot along the corridor is almost guaranteed to catch somebody—there's a hell of a scattering! So I got all the shotgun training done in one day, since I have at least some practice with it already. Now we're working on the pistol, and that's much more interesting!

I was naive and thought it'd be like in the movies. Let's stand at the line and start shooting.

Yeah, like you're just gonna stand…

They started to teach me how to jump, run, and fall, so there were more bruises on my knees. That's why the USECscover their kneecaps! Not to show off, there's a reason for it! And there's all manner of gloves, turns out they aren't just a fashion accessory. We didn't actually start shooting right away, and it wasn't anything like the usual shooting range I had in the army. Not at all.

"Here... that's where we're going to do it."

I inspect the basement, and all sorts of unpleasant questions start to enter my head.

"And... what are we shootingat?"

The instructor smirks.

"Too early for that! You'll have time for that later!"

The lighting here is not great, a little weak. The light is falling from above, but I can't even figure out how it all works. Old furniture, cabinets, tables and chairs lying here and there... I'll break my legs before I learn something here! I share this conclusion with the owner of this sketchy-looking place.

"Yeah, easily!" He nods. "And not just your legs!"

The local instructor is an old dude. Obviously older than the blaster. His

reputation is utterly gloomy.

“Stepanych?” Korney grins. “He's a hell of a character, between you and me! Brutal and off his rocker, too! He was fired three times that I can remember, and he was restored! He's a well-respected man, knew our minister in his time. But in general an extremely unpleasant man, that's why I love him!”

How does that work?

“You can't feel sorry for the cadets! It is easier and cheaper to just bury them, and they’d have less pain. At least they wouldn’t have to go through such humiliations, that’s already not too bad.”

“What kind of humiliations?”

“Oh, you haven't visited him yet? Well, then I won't take away his fun…”

* * *

Full of foreboding, I went to my first class with him.

“In the past," the instructor says, looking me over, “I used to make people sign a release. Basically it stated that they understand everything, agreed to go along with my ill-considered plans, and give up any claims in advance. Now it is easier ... Have you seen the pit behind the fence?”

“Yes, I have…”

“That's where we're gonna put you if something happens.”

“Why is everything so scary?”

“The captain said to teach you seriously! I just have a simple setup. If you learn like shit, you won't make it to the end of the course alive!” the

teacher explains calmly.

“Are you guys conspiring or something? Korney is trying to scare me too!”

“Heh. And he is right to do so, I must say. Everything is simple in his craft.Pull the wrong thing and there’s nothing to bury anymore. In my field, if you fuck up, I gotta deal with you, carry you somewhere, bury you. At least the pit was dug with an excavator back in the day, it's big, there's enough space!”

Here's the starting point. Feels uncomfortable...

“Your task is simple.”

Stepanych turns on the lantern and lights up the path.

“Memorize it! There will be no illumination later. So, we start here,” he indicates to the spot. “Then we move over there! And there we turn, towards that closet over there. How you get through there, I don’t give a single flying fuck! But you need to crawl between these piles of garbage…”

“And then?”

“You'll see everything when you get there…”

I don't know what the catch is yet. It's a difficult path, but you can run it. Even if it’s not too simple...

“What's so complicated about this?”

The instructor snaps a buckle on me.

“You have a contactless sensor on your back. There are semi-autonomousguns in the room.”

I look back. No, I don't see anything yet.

“Don't stare, I haven't set them up yet. That's the newest self-preparation system, just so you know. Hits with rubber buckshot a centimeter in diameter. So the kick will be... hmm-hmm... solid. It aims slowly but surely. You crawl like a pregnant turtle, don’t come crying to me! You'll get it inthe back! Or lower ... depends on how lucky you are! So, if you don't want to moan and wail, run fast!”

While continuing to talk, he slowly drags the gun out from somewhere and puts it on some complicated stand. It's like a semi-autonomous turret, I've seen one on the Internet before. Some Terra Group objects, as far as I know, have similar devices. I share my hunch with Stepanych.

“You're right! There are things like that in the city. Except that they have real weapons on them. But this is my invention, I built it myself! In the pastmy superiors objected strongly to it, they said it was too cruel! Well, a usual bullet hits much harder! But no one objects to that... except for the law…”

He's got yellow cardboard cartridges in his hands, they looksimilarto my shotgun cartridges!

“Standard police shotgun," the instructor explains. “Just tweaked it a little bit, and now it's also self-loading. We used to use KS-23s, but it was too powerful. This is a little lighter, at least it won't kill you immediately.”

The shotgun is loaded and he puts the same sensor as the one hanging on my back on a pile of bricks. He covers it with a thick board and walks away.

“Look!”

Stepanych clicks a button.

The servo drives are wailing gently and the barrel is slowly turning towards the target.

A second...

Boom!

Damn, that hit my ears hard! The instructor doesn't care, he has ear protection on.

The buckshot hit just below.

“Look, now the installation will make a correction…”

Boom!

Whoa!

Boom!

The board cracked and flew away.

“Okay... Now you have an idea what will happen to you if you crawl like you’re a pregnant cockroach.”

Fucking hell, what did I get myself into! Getting trained by such a sadist? On the other hand... do I want to live? Well then, don’t whine! I may have been lucky up to this point, but nobody promised that would continue!

“Don't get too nervous," Stepanych says more gently. “I build this path three years ago. There was, you know, a need to really train someone. It's an old method, and our forefathers didn’t bother much with their trainees, a tried-and-true formula, I only added a little bit of myself. Our ancestors, they pushed their students really far! On the other hand, they at least had a chance in battle! And a pretty good chance, I'll tell you! I went through the same thing from those very forefathers, and they were not simple dudes, more wolves than men.They could do such things with a pistol! Eh…”

He did give me a vest and a steel helmet with a face guard, though. And

some clever shields for my hands and feet, so that the rubber buckshot wouldn't break any limbs with the first shot.

“But you’ll still have to roll on the floor!”

Move fast!

I learned that almost immediately. And I also learned that rapid movement does not mean that you have to jump over the obstacles like you’re a mountain goat. When my leg got stuck in some metal, the buckshot hit right next to me, making me literally pop out of my shoe! I was lucky... If I had tightened my shoelaces properly... From now on this will be a lesson—watch your step!

The first time I got hit was in my shoulder when I tried to crawl under the wardrobe all cunning like. I felt that hit! Didn't take into account, like the dumbass I am, that this place has clear lines of sight!

“To shoot, you have to get to a location you can shoot from!” summarizes my instructor. “Preferably while still breathing! At the same time keep your hands, legs, and head at least relatively intact.”

He looks at me and sighs.

“Although some people obviously have their head on the wrong way.”

In the evening I fall to my bunk, exhausted. These two cheerful sadists are capable of bringing anyone to their wit’s end! Even in my dreams I think I'm screwing something on, or running somewhere. Upon meeting me one morning, Veremeev snidely notices that judging by my appearance I have just returned from a marathon. Yes, I wonder how much he’d like what I’m going through.

My old acquaintance Ivan explains that this cheerful couple of homegrown sadists once taught at the training center for special forces. Only after its abolition, as part of another "optimization," did they find themselves in the

service of the city police department.

“They didn't have much time before retirement, so they were sent here... to finish serving.”

Something suddenly tugs at me...

“Just these two?”

My comrade looks at me with surprise.

“Well, I heard there was someone else besides them. But I won't say with certainty!”

That’s an interesting situation…

Today is the first time I’ve fired a pistol here. Stepanych was obviously dissatisfied.

“Your weapon is a shotgun! Just shoot down the corridor and don't worry!”

Like I don't know that!

But on the second attempt I was awarded with some sparse praise. I managed to pass the whole tricky path without hitting any surprises for the first time. However, my shirt was so sweaty you could wring sweat out from it!
And another day, and another.

“Given your surprising luck," says Korney thoughtfully, ”I can make a cautious assumption that you have a small chance to survive in this mess for a little while longer. And not even lose your arms or legs.”

“How about my head?”

“If you lose anything because of your own stupidity or negligence, it means

that you no longer need your head, since it's not working properly…"

Now that's a fucking good-bye wish! No, you have to be born an instructor! For only the bile and sarcasm you're born with can make a teacher like him.

In general the man is right!

Only now I understand what an arrogant bastard I was! Nothing but luck explains why my bones are not lying under a fence somewhere.

"I owe you a glass of booze!"

"That's all?" Korneysmirks. "A bucket at least!"

But he doesn't drink much! Neither does Stepanych. They're not fully sober, but... there's something here.

It's an interesting situation, by the way!

Both of them almost never leave the base. And that's strange, because Veremeev is a tough enough guy in that aspect. If you don't go on raids, you eat after those that do. This rule is strictly applied to everyone. But not to this strange couple! The captain gives half-sized meals to all those that do not fight. To everyone, but not these two...

Yesterday I had a long conversation with Veremeev, which resulted in a small caravan heading to Khokhol. I am paying for the lessons. As promised, generously. And a bit above the initial price... I have to say a special thanks to the instructors, don't I?

I go with this caravan. On the way, I hope to drop by a familiar house and pick up the stashed hard drives. Everything hidden nearby has already moved into the hands of the local inhabitants.

But Stepanych gets a personal gift!

A Glock with two spare magazines.

The man seems a little touched.

“This is just for boasting... a gun for quick shooting along a corridor.”

But he took the gun and even hung it on his belt.

“Here you go!”

A wooden ammo box hits the table. Korney snidely grinsinto his mustache.

“We’ve gathered something for you... From our poor house to you. So you don’t run out of here with a naked ass.”

Wow... I wish I had it as bad as this poor house! You can set up half a block so tightly, you’d be scared to sneeze on nearby streets!

“You'll find the explosives yourself, you’re not an idiot…”

That's fairly easy, I know who to ask! There are fuses, I’ll take care of the rest!

I take my KS off my shoulder and put it on the table.

“Let’s call this my response!”

The bomber is grinning like a cat!

“A good device! And small, great in our business.”

It's hard to carry two guns at once, and I still like ZIG better. And I can shoot it more precisely. The KS in a rich setup looks quite spectacular. Collimator, light, laser pointer, cool! So the response ended up being quite good.

Chapter 15

When you're walking around the city, being accompanied by an armed squad is much more comfortable than crawling on your belly through the alleys. I can't say that you don't need to look around, but it warms my heart that it's not just my eyes that are scanning the surroundings. And the reputation of the captain's guys is pretty serious, nobody tries to get in their way if they don't have to. These guys shoot quickly and on target. Which doesn't surprise me anymore! With instructors like these, it's surprising they aren't trying to expand their area of influence.

But, like Stepanych said, you can teach everyone, but not everyone can be taught!

"Pulling the trigger isn't hard," I remember him saying. "But to hit on target... that takes brains! And nowadays there aren't many of those to go around…"

Fuck knows, maybe there are some reasons why Veremeev doesn't have a lot of competent specialists. And he doesn't trust everyone equally.

"You don't need anything weird from us, that's why we can talk calmly," he once told me. "Everything is clear. You asked for something, paid for it, and we do it. No mindfucks! No fairy tales about having a common cause and shit like that. One person wants, the other oneis capable of fulfilling that want. If someone who wants something and is able to pay for it, we work. Which is why I appreciate you, you're not a bullshitter!"

Well, saving Ivan also contributed. And the fact that I paid for all my requests in advance only strengthened our understanding. I didn't ask any questions, I didn't start doling out advice and moral guidance (which would be weird coming from me anyways), and I didn't touch on any sensitive topics. The fact that I was escorted to the gate by a patrol of USECs was also taken into account by the experienced captain. What conclusions he drew from that, God only knows, but he didn't express any obvious

hostility. He's a smart man, strange that he's just a captain! On the other hand, especially clever subordinates typically don't reachreally high ranks.

My stash was found quickly enough, and for a small fee, the head of the group even allocated two porters. And although we have already had an agreement about this with the captain, I don't mind. I won't lose much, and it's better to maintain good relationships with everyone you can.
Here'sa familiar roadblock! From behind the concrete blocks, Gavrish's friends are peeking out, cautiously watching the approaching people with their guns out.

In this situation any boasting is quite appropriate, so I bravely break off from the group and show my face to the bandits.

Everything changes!

The guns are lowered and the group is gently escorted straight to the dealer. Not without an armed escort, but quite respectfully.

We did make a small stop on the way. While people took a smoke break, I dragged my trophies and other cargo to the nearest salvo quickly. And this time I set a real trap there! Not a trivial ringer or cracker, but a real mine! No more jokes.

Sledgehammer also greets me quite amicably, which feels really nice! And henoticed the new submachine gun right away.

"Did you go shopping?"

"Echos of war... In my business this one is more convenient."

The guard nods and lets me in. By the way, he didn't demand that I surrender my weapon! But only two of my companions are allowed to follow, and without weapons. They're not asked to leave their knives at the post. These guys have a reputation, they don't typically allow knives around here. I notice them exchange a quick glance, now the captain will definitely

be informed that the attitude towards me is not the same as towards all other visitors.

Mr. Ogryzko greets us warmly, though he doesn't offer us any tea or coffee. He nods at me insome special way and gestures to wait until he talked to his customers.

"No problem! I'm in no hurry. By the way, anybody pass on anything for me?"

"There was from a delivery from USECs, if that's what you mean."

"Exactly that! Good, we'll wait."

The Veremeyev people will take note of this information too, you can bet on it! I sit to the side, watching the trade. My companions have brought shells and ammunition to sell. Considering how much stuff like that they have there, they can keep bringing it here for a long time to come. In return they demanded food and medicine, as usual. Hmm... I naively thought that on the medicine front they were fine, they had the warehouses! But I was wrong. Storage units aredifferent, I suppose. Ammunition is not always near medicine.

The trade doesn't take long. At the end, I ask the trader to give my companions a certain amount of money, promising to reimburse it today. I haven't been at home yet!

Khohol, without any surprise, counts the bills.

"We good?" I ask the head of the group.

"All good!"

"Then take it easy! My regards to the captain!"
We say goodbye.

The guests drag the goods out the door, take the guns, and the door bangs behind their backs.

“And now we can talk!” Ogryzko nods to the table in the corner.

Cognac, canned ham, olives, if only I always lived like this! He brings all of this stuff with him in a small basket. He puts it on the table and fills the glasses with a master's hand.

“Well, to our good health!”

I haven't had good cognac in a while!

“How did you charm the fucking USECs?”

“Pfft…” I wave my hand. “Just little things! Their group was squeezed down by some sectarians, so I helped a little bit…”

“That’s fucking little? If you get paid so well for this kind of help, maybe I should become a helper too?”

“Why not?! Get Sledgehammer out on the streets, he’ll be making money hand over fist!”

Khokholsmirks.

“Well, Pablo could! But me..." He waves his hand.“I’m not much of a shooter!”

The commander of USECs didn’t lie. In addition to all sorts of nice things that can make my life a little easier in these harsh days, he gave me an envelope of money. So it is not necessary to run home, I can pay the trader immediately.

“Where did you go for your walk?”

“Here, nearby. I dropped by the captain’s, and I had a message for them, too.”

“Did you hire him?”

Well, well, well... and why would he want to know that? Okay, let's play along.

“Well, I don't know what was in the letter. Not my business, you know. But he sent a lot of people the next day... That money you just gave them, it's only part of the payment. The rest they picked up from caches earlier.”

Let him guess, what did Vermeev’s menactually do? What did the Predator pay them so handsomely for?

“And what have you heard besides?”

Again, the dude is up to something. Which one of us has people visiting us all the time? Not me, I don’t sell anything!

Okay, here I won’t aggravate him.

“Everything fucking sucks! Fighters acting like they broke off the chain! They jump around like dumbasses all over the city and shoot in all directions. Angry, they don't want to keep any agreements. Imagine, one of them tried to fuck over my boss!”
“Oh, yeah?!” Khohol is absolutely sincerely “surprised."

“That’s the truth! Didn’t really work out for that person, they got wiser!”

“You didn't take part in that, did you?”

“’That?’ What the fuck is ‘that?’ I'm sorry, but what else happened while I was away?”

“Nope... I'm not the only one like that, there are other smart guys too.”

Let him make of that what he will!

The salesmencloses his eyes, and then pours another drink.

“Mm-hmm... I got something new…”

There's a cardboard packet on the table. And what’s this?

Yeah... blue-headed cartridges. I should take those!

“That’s it?”

“Got zinc too…”

“How much do they cost?”

Dude, has anyone ever told you that greed is the way to poverty? Okay, I won't go broke. I need cartridges for my submachine gun. And the captain only has the usual bullets in his warehouses, from Barnaul, but the administrator advised me against taking them, they said originals would be better suited to this weapon. The difference is not that noticeable in an ordinary pistol usually, when people are firing at point-blank. But for anything at least more or less accurate at a hundred meters, it is better to find imports. So I didn't take anything back there.

“I will also take the usual ones. Imported, preferably.”

“Got those. There are even cartridges with expansive bullets and with a steel core, you can consider them.”

“Three hundred of each of them. I also need explosives.”

“A lot?”

“What do you have?”

The owner only shrugs his shoulders.

“TNT... I can find you about half a box.”

“It will do!”

That’s all I need, especially since I need to drag this back! I'm no Hercules!

Waking up wasn't pleasant at all, and the morning wasn't good either... The radio snapped, and Gavrish's voice asked for a meeting. God knows why, but I didn't like it immediately. Of course, we'd talked like this before, but I didn't care so much the other times. Did I not get enough sleep?

Okay, let’s meet. Thank God the block where all our conversations usually take place is not that far. But for the sake of disguise I ask for twice as much time—let him think that my nest is somewhere far away from this place.

“They want to talk to you," he says instead of greeting me.

“Who and about what?”

“Kaban. The Boar”

“Um... and who is that?”

The ataman sighs and briefly explains the situation. It turns out that this dude is the deputy to some local authority called Foma. And they are both, to put it mildly, aren’t happy.

“I tried to talk my way out of it, but it didn't work! They almost put a knife to my throat, saying get us that dude!”

“Definitely me?”

“Yes…”

“How do they even know about me?”

Gavrish is shy, shifting his weight. The ataman is clearly hiding something!

“Well... Kaban saw you... From far away!”

“Does he know who I am and with whom I work?”

“He knows…”

Okay, I see. The bandit showed weakness somewhere, and that's what the other smart daredevils took advantage of.

“And what else do they know about me?”

After the leader leaves, I sit and think. It seems that my quiet life (was it ever actually quiet?) has come to an end. Foma’s group is much stronger than Gavrish’s gang. They significantly exceed it in every parameter. So I shouldn’t expect any support from him. And besides, who can speak for me in this situation? Nobody… just yourself, darling, walk with your own two feet! I wonder where I have to go? Judging by the mood of the ataman, he was offered something quite nasty, so he will gladly turn me in to the more dangerous opponent. A bandit is a bandit!

Chapter 16

“So are you the Predator?” An old dude, reminiscent of the animal he’s nicknamed after, and obviously not in the mood for a long conversation.

“No. Not at that level, alas... I am Denis. Vortex.”

“And I don't care... So, listen!”

Is he absolutely sure of his superiority? Seems that way…

“The elders have talked... No one knows this Predator, or has seen him. Where is he, and how can we talk to him?”

“Fuck if I know! I’ve never seen him in person, only through contacts.”

“Well, that's what I thought," the thug grins.

Yes, he is clearly not shy! He isn’t afraid of anything.

“You’re the ones that got Makar, right?”

“Yes.”

“He was under us. So this was the first mistake!”

“Next.”

My voice sounds calm. Do not show your fear! Shit, and my first wish is to just jump out the window and run. No. I wouldn’t make it five steps, they’d kill me. Look at the kind of thugs he has in security! Plus, I’m alone and had to hand over my submachine gun to Gavrish.

From the very beginning of the meeting, when I saw that Kaban's guards hadn't left their guns, a chill filled my soul. There was an unpleasant taste

in my mouth. They took my ZIG away, even demanded that I give up my pistol. I took out the grenades myself, there were only the knives left. Apparently, nobody takes these weapons seriously. Well, yes, especially considering the identity of the owner. By the way, Gavrish wasn't invited to the meeting, which was a really bad sign.

Foma's friend is looking at me surprised. I look too calm! It's strange...

"Makar was collecting paperwork for Foma and other crap. He hid all this crapin his safe."

"And?"

"And that safe was personally gutted by you!"

"So what? They tell me to gut the safe and I do it. Tell me to loot a body, no questions either…"

"Check the crapper…" The thug adds maliciously.

"I'd look at you. When they tickle behind your ear with the barrel of a gun, I think you'll happily start searching a trash heap. There are different ways to ask, you know…"

Kaban jumps up and grabs me by the collar. He's a big man, and he pulls me off my chair like a carrot out of a garden bed!

"What are you doing, you fool?! Who you running your mouth at?!"

"Do you want to live? Now, I mean?"

"What?!"

"Give me a pat on the back…"

The gangster's face looks bewildered. His free hand slams me on the

specified area.

“What?”

“TNT, three kilograms.” I move his hand off my jacket. “And the detonator is right here!”

Something appears in my left hand.

“I unclench my hand, and everybody's fucked up in an instant! Some will immediately die,others will suffer. You yourself, what do you want?”

Foma’shenchmanbecomes gloomy.

“This isn’t proper.”

“And what about the fact that you didn’t leave your guns, is that proper? Or are you not covered by the general unwritten rules?! Shut up, dude, and sit down! They’ll bury us together if it comes to that… scrape us into one bucket with shovels!”

Kaban licks his immediately dry lips. I think a gun or a knife wouldn't scare him as much, he’s seen some shit! Must have seen something like that more than once. But like that, taking everybody out together…

“Send away your goons! There will be no conversation in their presence!”

He hesitates, and I demonstratively raise my left hand up, you can see the thin wire that leads to my pocket. Can’t be knocked out…

“Everybody leave!” the bandit says without turning his head.

“And close the door behind you,” I scream at them.

The door shuts, and the behavior of Kaban changes dramatically! He nods quietly to the chair next to him.

“Sit down, let’s parlay… Put your thing away, no need to scare me anymore. Consider me motivated.”

I raise my eyebrow.

“Okay, you convinced me that you are not a pussy. So I can talk to you normally.”

That's how he needed to rationalize sending the guards away?

I sit down, but I still don't put the button away.

“Here's the thing…" the thug says thoughtfully. “I believe my elders, and since they say they don't know this person, they probably don’t. I don’t remember the same name among the vorsand the blatnoy people. But from among the wet workers who wereutterly lawless, a character like that could have appeared. Have you been working with him for a long time?”

“I started before the mess. More than a year. But then the work wasn't like this at all.”

Foma’s friend nods.

“That follows... back then everybody had enough, there was no need to kill people indiscriminately…”

He doesn’t talk for a while, then he turns to me.

“So listen here! The way you treated Makar, I don't give a fuck. But Foma did not like it. And he said this…”

Kaban is scratches his chin.

“Gavrish must return the Makar base. To whom, Foma will say. Your boss must return what you took from the safe. And pay a penalty. Not too bad,

just a million bucks. You have to do this within a week."

"That's it?" I ask calmly.

"That's it. Then let's go our ways kindly, without war. Your friend won't manage against Foma, the people will not support him, and his strength is not enough for such a fight. Your boss, if he is out there somewhere, will hardly fight us over such trifles. If he is who I think he is, it's easier for him to pay and be friends with us. It's more profitable."

"Any other options?"

The bandit smirks.

"Not a fool, I see, you really think! Let's put it this way... Foma is dissatisfied with all this. Personally! And others don't want to put lay their lives down for no good reason.Even without this we have confrontations basically every day. And why the fuck do we need another pain in the ass?"

"So the problem is just with him? Okay…"

Kaban raises a finger, interrupting my speech.

"That's it, I won't say anything else. Nobody will betray him, people would not understand this situation. And I don't know any scumbags on the side willing to raise their hand at an authoritative vor. USECs and Bears will not get involved in this, they have other interests. Even if someone pays them, in the end, it will cost them more. So if you don't decide anything within a week, I've painted you the picture in detail. You bring the papers and money, and Gavrish gives up Marak's base. My guys will go there today to see that nothing gets lost. And in general... they will listen…"

He's getting up.

"Did you understand all that?"

With my right hand I take out the spare magazine from my gun and push one cartridge out.

“Catch!”

The bandit easily catches it in the air.

“What’s this?”

“A reminder.”

* * *

“So what are you going to do now?” I lean back against the wall and look at the ataman.

Gavrish looks pretty shifty. Of course he tries to hide it in every possible way, but he’s not much of an actor...

“I don't know... The guys don't want to fight, the Depot guys are stronger. And many will join them. Then we will be allowed to live after!”

Yes ... the situation is fucked up beyond all recognition! It seems that the ataman, even before the official declaration of war, is in a hurry to surrender.

“And you have no options?”

Gavrish only smiles sadly.

“Options... As soon as we pass on the base, that’s it, you can flush us down the crapper. The next step from Foma will be to throw me off. And then they’ll kill me quietly. Maybe leave, go somewhere... Warehouses will not accept me, they’re more of a cop spot. Dimka Chestnut maybe?”

“Who the fuck is that?”

“He’s under Tatarin, holds the Merchant's Yard.”

I know this shopping center, a huge building. Wow, turns out someone is hanging out there!

“Well Foma will get you there too.”

“Then the port. The port guys have always been in a shitty relationship with the Depot guys. These guys will not surrender me. Fuck, starting from the bottom again! However, there are still soldiers out there somewhere, as angry as the devil! But they don't seem to be climbing over their fences yet. So, if you don't come close to them you can live.”

This sucks… Gavrish will leave, and then the factory and the areas near Khokhol’s spot will be occupied by Foma’s people. And that's it, my base is closed, you can’t walk around calmly. What the fuck am I talking about? I was asked to pay a million dollars! Where will I get so much? I have no doubt that the experienced Kaban hinted tactfully to the traders, so I’d have a hard time selling anything for a profit. Definitely not for a million. And after that… If there will be an “after."

“So you can't expect your guys to help you?”

“Yes, none of them will fight Foma! Then there will be no rest from attacks at all!”

The ataman looks me in the face with a desperate look in his eyes.

“And your boss… Maybe he can do something?”

“If he wants to, he can. Foma didn’t shit in his soup yet!”

I'll be quiet about the ultimatum that Kaban gave me. Somehow, I think it's better not to speak about it yet.

“Well... how about you ask! He didn't just give us the Makar base for nothing, did he?!”
I look at the ataman and I understand that I won't be able explain anything to him. What can I say? Kaban is right about one thing. None of my acquaintances will fight Foma now. And not because they respect him. Not at all. They really don't give a fuck about intra-bandit fights. The more bandits die, the better off they are. Fewer opponents is a plus!

Or I’d have to pay.

A lot.

But that’s a dead end, I don't have any money like that now. Fuck, I don’t have any money at all!

The Hood...

No. He's also out of the picture. Why would he want to argue with these bandits? What could they fight over? I can’t go to the sectarians, can I? They probably give zero fucks… though what the hell do I know about them? There is only one figure who really doesn't care about all these conventions and agreements. This bandit or other, he really doesn’t give a damn! He doesn't owe anybody and nobody has any power over him.

ThePredator…

The one and only, there's no one else.

“I've got Kaban’s people sitting at every spot right now.”The ataman looks completely lost. “They’re not stirring shit, just looking for now. And I can't send them away, it’d be war immediately. I have no formal reason to get in their faces, we’re not enemies.”

“How did they show up?”

“They just came. They say we’re allies... And my guys don't want to fight

them anyways, nobody wants to die. The newcomers have their own food so I can't even object to that…"

Okay, Gavrish's given up.

* * *

"I see. All I need from you is the location of Foma's home."

"Check this out…"

I look out the window carefully, trying not to touch the curtain. The house is a little sideways, and what I'm looking for isn't very visible.

"He occupies the central entrance. The whole thing. In the two remaining entrances staircases have beendestroyed, no way upstairs."

Standard seven-story house. Three entrances.

In the central entrance, the windows are all bricked up, you can see that through the binoculars. On the street right in front of the entrance, there is a gun nest made from concrete blocks. Above them, you can see the heads of the bandits. And you can seethey have a machine-gun.

"There's another one of these on the other side, too." My guide peeks over my shoulder.

"There are ten guards…"

"More. There are also people sitting inside on the ground floor."

"How many?"

"Yeah… don't know… They change once an hour. Do you see a pipe in the window?"

A tin pipe sticks out of one of the windows.

“They have a stove there. Sometimes they light it.”

“With what?”

“Er... well... with wood, I guess…”

That's right. I see wood stacked just outside the house. I suppose that's where they bring the logs from. I carefully look at the windows of the central entrance through my binoculars. There is no reflection, not a spot, and it’s already evening! I can’t assume that everyone is sitting there in the dark.Right, by candlelight...

“Is there ever light in the windows?”

My guide is a skinny, unsightly man. Dressed discreetly, on his shoulder is a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun. A simple backpack, a knife in a worn sheath. Barely a person, you meet him and you wouldn’t pay much attention. Well, yes... it doesn't all click in my head yet.

“Mityai is a scary man!” Gavrish twitches his head nervously. “It's better not to turn your back on him, keep that in mind! I only know about five dead, and he's been doing this for a long time. He started it before the mess, cops have been looking for him for two years!”

But this figure knows a lot. And he can get into various places unnoticed.

In this case, he took me to Foma’s place of residence in such a way that we did not see anybody at all, and this place is crawling with Depot people!

“Why don't you like Foma?” I asked him as soon as we left the territory controlled by Gavrish. “What the hell happened between you?”

“Does anybody like him?”

“I’m not asking about everyone!”

My guide smiles.

“Well, why do you dislike him?” he asks in response.

“I don't give a flying fuck. The boss gave me the order, so I work.”

“Shit!” Mityai is impressed. “I wish I lived like that! Killing people and getting paid!”

“Well, it’s more than just murder, although that happens sometimes too. Still, why don’t you likeFoma?”

“He doesn't like me. He wanted to offend me, and I can't forgive such a thing! I am not an officialvor, but I’m still human! And I want to live as I like! He can't command me, I’m not part of his fucking gang!”

The man is really pissed off at him, even his voice changed! Eitherhe’s a great actor, or something really rotten happened between them!

“And you want Foma to be murdered by someone?”

“Yes, anyone! I would even help the Bears, but they are not interested.”

“Did you suggest that to them?”

“Why do you care?”

Yes... It’s better to not ask him too many questions.

“No.” Mityai shook his head. “There is no light in the windows. Only on the first floor, where the guards are.

“And anyone on the roof?”

“Obviously! They sit there… You should keep in mind that there is one good shooter there! But he’s only here in the daytime. At night you can’t see shit, so he goes downstairs…"

* * *

I sit on the floor and try to add everything up.

Only one way upstairs?

Yeah, so the rooftop guards are walking to and fro near the ringleader's apartment? I doubt that… But the stairs in the entrances are collapsed! On the first floor, so you can’t get on the second floor. What do we know about the other floors? They could have punched through some exits a little higher so that they could pass from entrance to entrance without any hindrance. At the same time, there's no worry for the boss.

Binoculars again, we look at the windows in the apartments. So, this window’s broken, this one is ajar, and here’s a draft, the curtain moves in the wind. Only the windows on the stairs are tightly sealed.

But on other two floors, the fourth and fifth, the situation is absolutely different! All the windows are closed, there are no drafts or broken glass. In total, it’s eight apartments. Quite enough for the residence of the most fastidious gangster. And by the way, why this building? What's it got that other places don’t?

It’s on the outskirts, for one. The view from above isn’t too bad, you can’t approach unnoticed. That’s the second reason. Surviving a long siege even by superior forces is possible. And it is located…

Wait…

Not in the middle of the controlled area, why? What, there’s no other buildings like it? It may very well be that there aren’t. We have to do take a

little historic detour. Like I have the time for detours!

This part of the city is old, it appeared and developed along with the railway station, in particular with the notorious depot. Hence, most of the buildings here were erected around the same time. There are warehouses, packing buildings and other similar crap. Residential houses were erected not that long ago. And since there wasn't much space left, the old buildings were demolished without thinking twice. That's why in this area, several houses are often bunched together in a small area. There are no residential areas here. The house of the gangster is surrounded by small one- or two-story buildings. It rises above them like a medieval castle among the village houses. I'm not a specialist in psychology, but I'm willing to bet on a crate of cognac that such thoughts must have warmed the soul of the old gangster!

But there is a nuance...

Water, sewerage and stuff, how did they connect it? The surrounding houses are extremely old, certainly older than the apartment building, just look at the masonry. If they dug a trench for pipe-laying, like they should have, they would have damaged or destroyed something. No way around it! And it'd happen the same way in the west too, I'm sure. But there is no sign of that. Nothing's been dug up or torn down here for a while. And there is nothing along the street too, because there's no street. There's a winding path to the playground near the house, but I doubt someone would dig up such a crooked trench, it'd cost a pretty penny! And there must have been sewage systems in the surrounding buildings from time immemorial.

As far as I understand this dude, he's not a copy of Makar! He's much more clever! So there is a second way out of the house! It's likely this exit is underground.

Why?

What kind of asshole would run from the enemy right into a labyrinth of these houses and fences? There's no line of sight here, you can run out right

intothe enemy's position. The whole view is only available from the roof of the seven-story building. From there, the visibility is very good. It's not for nothing that some special shooter would hang out there. So we are looking for a tunnel, a sewer or cable tunnel. One or the other, they wouldn't send both down the same hole.

I ask Mityai. Yes, he confirms that there are very few people walking up and down the street. Typically they are patrols, but they don't appear too often. Everything can be seen and shot at from above, so why bother walking with your legs for nothing? He saw Foma himself here only once. But the distance was too far for a shotgun, or else he would have fired!

"He went to that house over there," Mityai points with a dirty finger. "And then he walked back."

"And what's in there?"

"Fuck if I know... Nothing special. Some guy ran out from there and then saw him off…"

"And who's the guy?"

"No fucking clue... some four-eyes. Not in the business, that's for sure!"

"Was he armed?"

"Maybe only with his own claws."

Interesting…

But this is secondary. Let's consider that the location of the leader to be established. Mityai hung out here for almost a week, and he saw Foma only once. As far as we know, he often visits the city.

Conclusion?

He comes and leaves so that no one sees him. We're not seriously entertaining the idea that the old thief can fly, so what's left? There's no water nearby, meaning rivers or canals, so swimming wouldn't help. There is only the option of the tunnel, so that's what we're looking for! Obviously I didn't dig a research pit, started from the other end.Since the houses have water, then there must be some way for it to get there? Obviously through tunnels. And if that's the case, then there must be hatches too. And most likely in the building I need they're part of the communications systemof the old houses. I found the hatch in the yard of a neighboring house, some kind of supply base.

Scared by Corney's horror stories, I carefully examine the hatch for nasty surprises. And although my inner voice keeps saying it's paranoid, I don't stop.

Clear. And how about from below?

Could be any of a number of ways. I would, after my lessons, justset up a grenade from below so that it explodes when the hatch is opened. Whether they kill the intruder or not, it'll make a hell of a noise that the guards will hear. I found a crowbar in some back room, so I try to break off a part of the cast iron ring that surrounds the hatch. Right, if only it were that easy, you'd need a jackhammer!

What the hell can I do?

There are no more options, so I climb into the basement of the building, which, according to my calculations, housesthe pipes. You can see them sticking out of the wall! Here you can use the crowbarwith more vigor, it's the basement, no one will hear a thing. And I don't believe that Foma's security mined this place too, not for a second. You'd need a railway car of mines and grenades to protect all the vulnerable places. If only Mityai would help, it would be quicker! But no, the asshole is sleeping! Although he's already done his part of the job, he's free to leave. But he, the fucking creepthat he is, wants to see! He wants to see... It's not clear, see what though? But my guide didn't want to leave, he chose a secluded place and

fell asleep there. Between us, he's a scumbag.

All right, the hole is big enough to get in. Having pushed my crowbar into there, I follow. About 40 meters, and here's the hatch I found earlier! There's nothing there, no grenades or other nasty things. Well, let's count that as good.

I found the main collector in an hour. Got all dirty, almost ripped off my sleeve, but I made it to the right place. A narrow corridor with brick walls.

There are familiar marks! So modern communications workers were been here!

What makes me think that this is the tunnel I need?

Everything is simple...

The Internet cable.

Black fiber-optic cable, laid out with brackets. A well distinguishable marking beginning with the letter "O." They wouldn't lay a separate cable like that to some weird uninhabited base, it'ssimple to throw a line from the nearest hub. Or install a simple wi-fi router. How many subscribers would they get? One or two, why would they bother? But a three-entrance, seven-story apartment building is a little different! These are much more interesting in terms of earning money, so they'd lay a cable.

And now we walk quietly. If my guesses are correct, there should be some guard downstairs. I move the night vision device to my eyes and go! Quietly, quietly… The first hatch, thin rays of light break through. In a hundred meters I find the second one. A right turn. But the cable goes straight, so that's where we go. On the barrel of my ZIG is a used cartridge on a string—a rod for tripwires. I won't notice it with my eye, the string will tell me.
Empty, nothing. But if they walk here often, it is quite possible that they won't have traps.

But under the next hatch there is a grenade! A regular RGD-5, I've already seen tons of them. A piece of wood is inserted into a crack, which presses on the grenade. They must have already pulled out the pin. Lift the lid, and boom! So the house must be close, they're beginning to take precautions. Now I walk really slowly. I look around, I listen, I movemy barrel back and forth and step carefully. Then I look again...

It's been 20 meters.

Another doorway to the side.

Okay, this one should be checked!

Hmm, a board? On the floor, along the hallway. Slightly not straight, almost the entire corridor is blocked. It is not wide here, about seventy centimeters. So the board is not too long either. Why is it here? What was the need to put it here? There is no need! The floor is dry, there are no puddles. But here it is, lying down! I squat, look around.

It's not lying flat! It's a little elevated above the ground, there's something under it. I take off my backpack, I take out a cape and cover myself with it. Turn off the night-vision device, flashlightat the lowest brightness. Under the board is a wooden box. Small, made from two parts that fit together. An anti-personnel pressure mine, the PMN. Colloquially known as "Goodbye, leg."Corney showed me one of these. A military invention, and still terrifying to this day! Some dumbass will step on the board and the top cover will be pressed down. Then the pin will pop out. There is a TNT bomb inside. And that's it, half your leg—gone. Even if you're not actually standing on it, in a narrow corridor even several uninvited visitors will get properly fucked up.

Conclusion?

This is an active tunnel. They often walk around here, so they take measures to make sure that no strangers go unnoticed. By the way, that's

not a good sign.I guess sectarians got in through here. Bandits and gangsters are reluctant to climb underground. It’s not their preferred battlefield...

But what's to be done, though?

This mine isn't dangerous for me, I'm not going to get into that passage yet. Or am I? In any case, giving myself away isn’t a good call. So leave it be, I just note this place in my head and I will be more careful around here.

And forward again...

I walk a hundred meters further without any surprises. I get to another passageway, but I don’t go there. Nothing interesting there except another trap, obviously. The curious thing was still waiting for me in another two hundred meters. The tunnel is blocked by sandbags. Behind them was a dull glowing light, and in it, it was possible to see black holes for guns in the sand bag wall. I could see it all pretty well through my night vision goggles.

So the way out, you have to assume, is somewhere nearby.

I look around.

Yeah, that's what I need.

Trying to move as quietly as possible, I climb up to an already familiar place, the shelves with the wires. I even settle down more or less comfortably. Nothing sticking me into my side is a win in my book!

And we wait...

An hour...

Somebody's moving behind the wall, you can hear unintelligible voices. It's not about me, just the usual bored sentry talk. And why would they be

worried at all? Nobody will come out from the right or left. It's quiet. The rumble of an explosion will be the best warning. And anyone who turns out to be so stupid enough to turn on a flashlight will be seen right away.

They most likely don't have a night vision device. Why would you need one? The thing is expensive, and before their boss goes somewhere, surely a few guards will be ahead of himto check all the potentially dangerous places. And they will, unlike me, definitely use flashlights!

Door creaking! Metal clank, a shift change.

We listen!

* * *

Aboveground, settling in for the night, I calculate my chances. Not too good.

Shift changes every three hours.

For a little while the sentry are vigilant. They're not asleep in any case. Occasionally they shine a flashlight into the embrasures, talking about something. Then they calm down a little bit, and sometimes the conversation subsides completely. Are they really napping there? I don't suppose they're quite that dumb, are they? And just before the shift change they revive again, start walking, turning on theirflashlights for a bit. They smoke, of course. Who would have doubted it!

Do they have communication?

A walkie-talkie?

From the tunnel? Might not work...

But a field phone... Yeah, right and a computer terminal! Why didn't it ever ring?

And another day.

Mityai starts to get bored. It turns out that he had some alcohol, which he consumed before going to sleep. Today it ran out, so the bandit lost interest in sitting here.

“Are you actually planning on working?” he asks.

“Of course. I’m waiting for the order…”

He's doesn’tcare where I go, as long as there’s food and drink. Foma’s handymen don't check the surrounding houses, so we can hang out there for a long time!

“Okay..." sighs the bandit. “I’ll wait one more day.”

* * *

So, Foma travels underground, that's his main way in. And he is, presumably, convinced that nobody knows that. For at the other end of the corridor, as it turns out, there another identical fortification, where a couple of guards are also on duty. Theoretically, no one can get in here, the hatches in the main tunnel are mined. And an attempt to open any other hatch to the side won’t succeed either. Most of them are either covered with garbage, or locked up from the inside in some way. So I did the right thing by not trying to break the hatch cover in the yard. It wouldn’t have gotten me anywhere…

What are the options?

Attack the bandit in a tunnel? I doubt very much that he walks alone. I'm going to start a gunfight, but what's next? Most likely I won't be able to leave either.

Mine!

Yeah, and even a regular grenade will work in such a narrow underground passage, I can imagine it quite well, even my own ears will get stuffed. And this is the best case scenario. And again, the issue of leaving…

No matter how I think about it, there's always some big downside.

And there's almost no time! Two days left! Except I can try it like this… This time I carry a plastic canister with water. You can find a lot of them lying around. I also bring a plastic bag with freshly excavated dirtfrom the yard.

A risk. But what isn't? Previously, I conducted a couple of experiments in an empty garage. Fifty-fifty, once it worked and once it didn't. Well, I don't have time to invent something new anyways.

I stand by the familiar board with the anti-personnel mine and start working my magic. I dig a couple of bricks out of the wall with my knife and pour water on their location, so that it looks like the wall collapsed because water eroded the dirt beneath the wall. I put the bricks nearby, so anyone who inspects this place thinks that the explosion occurred because the bricks fell right on the board.

Everything looks quite obvious. Water eroded the dirt beneath the wall, bricks fell out, one of them fell on the board, causing the explosion. Everything makes sense, except for the fact that the brick would have toweigh much more than it does to do that. But I hope there are no bomb specialists among the guard. I will blow the mine over the radio. The distance isn't too far, and the signal will pass along the tunnel, I've already checked. The entire setup will be blown to shreds by the TNT, so I hope everything will look natural. When I finish my preparations I throw an empty canister on the rack and go to the place of observation I've been hanging out at.

Now we wait again…

It's nighttime and it's supposed to be dark in the building. Well, at least I

didn't notice any electric lighting. There are lanterns, I've seen those before. There are also lamps in the tunnel, most likely some kind of batteries or a small generator is powering them, but I strongly doubt that they will turn them on now. Anyone running to the bombing site will be as visible as if he were he's on the palm of my hand. The passage is narrow, there is nowhere to hide...

An hour...

The door bangs, the new shift is here! A quiet conversation, now the security guards that are done are going upstairs.

My finger presses the button.

The explosion is surprisingly quiet, but quite impressive. A blast wave rolls gently down the hall, pushing me in my back and making the lighting on the post blink. Whoa, do they have kerosene lanternshere?

Something is happening!

The sound of guns cocking, and a guard with an assault rifle runs out.Crouching on his knee, he looks into the depths of the tunnel. Good luck, he doesn't have night vision, and his eyesight is obviously not like a cat's. But I do have the device, so I see everything quite well. The backlight is still off, just in case… Three more comrades of the sentry appear next to him, the whole on-duty shift is in front of me now. A good target, but it's not mine.

"Khrip! Go upstairs, tell Grishka! And then run back with his guys!" one of the bandits commands.

It is said and it is done. The bandit is hiding behind the bags. The remaining three, listening to the darkness, move carefully to the place of the explosion.

Well, I expected something like that.

Holding my breath, I let the bandits pass. While they're passing me, I even stop breathing! I don't look at them. I don't want to find out whether a person can feel that they're being watched.

That's it, they've moved like fifty meters past me.

I gently roll off the rack and quietly move in the opposite direction.

So, the bags are behind me!

Faster!

Slip through the door.

Look around.

A normal basement under a residential building. There is nothing incredible here, and where would it come from? Almost all houses in the city that are connected to the city communications are arranged in a similar way. Ahead is another door that leads to the second entrance. And another one, in the side of the house, which exits right to the street. Having climbed around basements in my time I envision it all pretty well. But I'm not in a hurry, and I turn into the next room. There's a mountain of boxes here. Mostly empty. It's safe to assume the thin boards are quite suitable for burning the stoves that are here. Or maybe for something else, I don't know.

Steps!

Like a herd of horses…

But horses don't swear!

"Fucking hurry up, you lazy toads!"

“Fuck you…”

Everybody's going down relatively fast.
I run upstairs!

On the first floor, to the right, I see a dimly lit opening leading to the security rooms.

Well, I don't need to go there...

But the door's been covered by some sacks! Oh, so, Foma doesn’t walk through here? So he makes it outside some other way? Seems that way...

Upstairs!

Second floor.

It is empty and relatively quiet, there is one more floor to the leader's apartment, at least. There should be additional posts somewhere. I'm just sure that there are! But I won't go there either. It is a bad idea to start a shootout with an unknown number of guards.

I take out a small crowbar from the side pocket of my backpack and open the door closest to me. By the way, I'm not the first one to get in here like that, there are signs of a break-in on the door. Well that makes sense, the bandits had to check the whole house, didn’t they?

I spend a little time here.

I’m using quite a different skillset, one I have possessed for a while now. I have parts of a mobile phone with a microphone soldered on a thin wire, a voice amplifier app and headphones: a nifty listening device! An hour of work, but the results speak for themselves. The thin wiring would be hard to see in the daytime, and in the darkness it's invisible! I checked the operation of this device in the tunnel, listening to the chatter of the guards. And I even successfully managed to solve the issue offollowing them with

the mic. A regular ten-meter roulette measure. On one end, I fasten a microphone using tape and slowly push out the metal in the direction of the target. I also attach a piece of plastic to the end of the measure, which goes along the ground, so that the whole structure slides well and doesn't tip over. Yes, and it's quieter too. After some training, I managed to perform this operation quickly and with a minimum amount of noise. I can't come too close, but even a dozen meters means a lot in this case!

I put the headphone in my ear.

"... goddamn panicked sissies!"

"No, dude, don't go at us! Nobody can see through walls yet!"

"Fucking whatever, Foma is going to get pissed, ask why the fuck they put him in this kennel…"

I couldn't make out the rest, several pairs of feetstomping along the stairs at once. And the microphone lying on the floor unfortunately picks this kind of noise best.

Kennel...

If I understand correctly, in times of danger, the leader is quickly hidden in a shelter.

And what ... that makes sense.

Where would I look for a"kennel?"

Clearly not in his apartments, that'll be the first place to look. And not in the basements, no one ran past me. That would be weird! An explosion downstairs, why would they drag the leader down there too? What if it wasn't an explosion but some kind of attack? They'd have a huge probability of not making it at all.

If you think about it, what are the requirements for such a shelter?

Protection.

So, without any windows, because you could easily chuck something in there, even from the street. A grenade launcher would work...

The ability to get out of here fast.

So it's not high. I doubt that Foma is capable of growing wings. The second or third floor, not higher. Even an unprepared person would be able to get out if necessary. And if that's the case, it's not part of the central entrance! It only exits to two sides, and both of them are bound to be covered by the attackers.

The back of the building. And there shouldn't be any visible posts there, so as not to attract the attackers.

The lower flights of stairs in the outer entrances are collapsed. Assault from that side by the enemy is unlikely. But no one said that it is necessary to have a regular staircase to get down! A normal rope would do.

And where do we not have posts?

Yeah...

Little by little, silence fell in the building, occasionally interrupted by the steps of a few guards. They were moving at two-hour intervals, when the shift were changed.

A glance at the clock: it's 1:30 am. Another shift in thirty minutes. They pass by my apartment, go up to the third floor and split there. Part of the group walks upstairs, they're the security of the leader's apartments. And the rest leave somewhere on the same floor. I can tell they're leaving because the steps clearly move away. It would be strange for bandits to occupy positions only in one entrance without controlling the other ones.

Most likely they broke a wall in some apartment on the third floor and use it to get into the next apartment. Through it, they're in the other entrance. I strongly doubt that Foma would enjoy listening to the steps of his guard walking near or above his apartment. So they wouldn't go above.

Waiting for the bandit shift to pass, I slip out, close the door and quietly make my way upstairs. The night vision device is on again, and I can see the trash left behind on the stairs. Cigarette butts, scraps of paper…

There's a faint light coming from the fourth floor. Probably the area in front of the apartment of the boss. I don't need to go there.

They even trampled a path here.

I need to check the bottom floors in both entrances thoroughly. The second or third floor is where the back-up lair has to be. The first entrance is empty. There was a draft coming from under the locked doors, which means there are no windows in the apartments. As far as I remember from my observations, there isn't a single whole window on the fourth floor. But there are sandbags on the window sill of the corner room on the third floor. And what does that tell us?

Gun nest. Even my modest knowledge of military science is enough to grasp that. There is a passageway between the houses, and this position controls it. But on the other side, there is nothing like that, just a two-meter fence. Anyone who takes the risk of hiding behind the fence will be easily taken out from the roof of the house.At least I think so. A probable solution to the issue. It'll definitely be easy to make this guy's life terrible.

I hide in a nook and take out my phone. It is not just for eavesdropping, it also has a camera! And I have photos of the house from all angles.

So…

Seems my guesses aren't that far off! Two apartments on the third floor not only have intact windows, they also have curtains! This is strange.

Obviously it's not easy to enter, the doors were intact and locked. Well, I'm not in any hurry to get in there. But I found a fresh cigarette butt on the doorstep! Even a little wet, it was recently in someone's mouth.

Four apartments on this floor.

One of them has a breach in the wall, that's where they walk between entrances. The apartment on the right is empty, there is nothing interesting in it. The door is locked, by the way, but with my new skills it wasn't a problem.

But the other two have metal doors and the windows the curtains are shut. Here it is, the shelter...

Okay, we've solved this problem. I have to assume that behind these locked doors are Foma'smost trusted guards. I doubt that they even have shift changes as often as the others. Surely there are some supplies of food and drink, and they don't have to be on guard all the time, do they? It is clear that there is also some special signal so they open the door togreet their ward. But there is no need to find out. Let's say I find out what the signal is, so what? What benefits will it bring? By the way, I assume that there might be some particularly tasty titbits of loot inside the shelter. Well what do I care? No time for tidbits.

* * *

Look out the window. It's night, there's almost no visibility. So, to do it as I planned is almost impossible. What, I have to wait again? I guess I do. And, by the way, tomorrow is my deadline! The day after tomorrow, there'll be a visit to Gavrish from Foma's men. What follows is quite clear. In the morning Mityai will break the news to the ataman that I've failed. I think he has everything ready to run away. Well, whatever, I got my own shit... The issue of where I'd sleep didn't bother me much. The building is full of empty apartments. It is quite possible that they check them from time to

time. But not every day.

What if Foma leaves?

Doubtful.

Today he will be waiting for news from the people he tasked with setting up his ultimatum. Only tomorrow, when he realizes that his demands have not been met, will he send his thugs. Gavrish already has “observers” there who may well play the role of executioners at a moment’s notice. And so the ataman will most likely escape in the morning. Surely he has already agreed on a meeting point with Mityai. That’s why he’s not leaving, it’s not just curiosity.

In accordance with tradition, I choose to rest on a balcony. I tie a rope to the railing, that’s my exit strategy just in case. I can jump offthe third floor easily and quickly. I placed a mine on the front door of the apartment, installing a whole six hundred grams of TNT to reliably fuck everyone up!In the fuse box there’s a second bomb to fuck up the arriving help. This isn’t a simple circuit breaker, it’s remote controlled. The system is tested, so it’ll go off!

It doesn’t matter, because I couldn't sleep. Well, there is always a silver lining, so I sit and carefully prepare all the tools for my night out. I even have a quick snack. Meanwhile, the house is living its own life. Somewhere I can hear steps, even some music. You have to think that the leader is having a grand old time. Let him. It’s his last.

You might think that I am absolutely cold-blooded and collected. Yeah, right! Just no chance at a mistake, no right to miss! So I imagine that I'm in Korney’s class. Everything is more or less known. It's scary, I won’t lie. But I'm trying to assure myself that this is no more of a challenge than what the old saboteur offered me. Yes, yes, he was a saboteur! For even my modest knowledge is enough to understand, this dude didn’t spend his life taking down mines. No, he was the one who set them up.

And his comrade... what a character!

I don't think they put too much of their soul into teaching me. Most likely the men just longed for the work they used to do so often, so they gave themselves to the task with all their heart. If it all works out, I'll give them a bucket of cognac! I don't think the captain will object to that.

Voices sound below, the door creaks.

I get up and press against the wall to look out the window.

There is the way out...

Since the central entrance doors are barricaded, the bandits go outside through the basement door in the side of the building. There's nowhere else. I doubt that they climb down to the second floor of the outside entrances, how would you climb back? There's most likely another post. It's a good thing I didn't go there yesterday, I thought that might be the case!

Looking at the bandits walking down the street, I see another reason they chose this exit. In the middle of the group, there's some poor guy. His clothes are torn, his hands are tied behind his back—a prisoner. And this explains a lot.

This exit is the way to the prison.

At least that what you assume watching the house from outside.

Why?

It makes sense, you wouldn't take guys like that through the front entrance, would you? So everyone left through a special door. The procession did not go far, though. They came up to the flowerbed, threw a shovel to the ground and made a gesture to dig. There were fresh graves nearby, a traditional place for them then. The man spoke back and immediately washit in the back with the buttstock of an assault rifle. Dig the pit, no

more talk!

Even his hands were untied so he could dig. They took aim at him to avoid further talk on his part.

What is there to do… he started digging.

Man, he's digging his own grave! It's creepy... I've only read about stuff like that in books. And saw in movies...

Well, what if I was in his position? Would I dig? Or use the shovel to punch the guard in the face? Fuck if I know, I'm sitting here, with a gun. And he's there. He's not surrounded by fairytale elves. He finished digging, threw the shovel out and climbed out himself. He did that quickly…

That's it?

Is he gonna get killed now?

One of the accompanying bandits asks him something, the man is shaking his head.

Bam!

The man is hit in the face, with vigor, I must add! He buckled over to the ground, but the bandits took him under his arms and jerked him upright.

Again question, and another punch.

What did he do wrong?

They tie his hands behind his back. The end!

Oops!

The pit wasn't deep, just like I thought! The man was shoved in there, and

he was chest-deep. So they covered him so only his head and shoulders stick out fromunderground. The senior bandit squats down and tells the poor man something. Doubt that he wished him happiness. After which the bandits left in no hurry. And this new decoration appeared in the flowerbed. Wow, it's insane here…

My work has come to an end. I can take a break. At night I definitely won't get any sleep, and I need to preserve my energy! Thank God nobody came to check my shelter. So I almost got some proper rest. Almost, because I was half-asleep anyway. Nerves. They're not made of steel, you know.

The alarm clock goes off, it's time to work.

I quickly collect my crap and look around—haven't forgotten anything, have I? By the way, I shouldpick up my own charges, I don't need to defend this place anymore.

Nobody walks around the building anymore, the bandits have calmed down. Well, one and a half hours before shift change, it is quite possible to do this! Throwing a rope loop onto a pipe sticking out from a window proved to be a challenge. But it was possible. I pull the rope and wrap it around the rest of the window frame. Got it. Now I attach a wire ring to it, which is used to suspend the radio detonator explosive charge in the air.I gently pull the rope, let's go!

Done—the charge hangs on the pipe.

I release one end of the rope and pull the other back. Now it's impossible to pull this thing back.

I move to another place. Ropes won'tbe enough, I need to walk.

A flight of stairs...

Another one.

Second floor. I takea breath and listen.

Downstairs I hear a muttering, someone is still awake. He is not sleeping, that's his problem, as long as he doesn't go for a walk!

Another flight…

I see sandbags near the front door. On the side, the open door leads to the security room. I have to walk past it!

"Remember," Stepanych rises from his seat. "You cross a passage like this!"

Pushing his back from the wall, he somehow turns on his heels, I only manage to notice an obscure shadow dash across the doorway. I simply don't have time to raise my weapon.

"Shit!"

"You're not the first!" The instructor smirks. "I remember only a couple of guys that were able to raise their weapons in time. And only one hit. Physiology, a man simply does not have time to react. Come on, work!"

Let's try it out then…

My tools and guns aren't too loose, my backpack's on the floor. The charge isin my belt behind my back. I press my back against the wall, breathe slowly to ventilate my lungs and gather strength.

Here we go!

For a second, the inside of the room flashed before my eyes. A bandit sits with his back to the door, and a small lantern, most likely battery operated, is dimly lit up in front of him. I have time to notice one more guyto the side. On the table you can see mugs, some cans, must be their evening tea.

Oof... I take a breath.

It seems that nobody noticed my jumping around. I listen just in case. No, the muttering continues slowly, uninterrupted.

Shoving the charge is one minute's work.

Click, and the LED lights up dimly, the bomb is ready.

Now—back.

“Klim…”

“What?”

“What was that?”

“Where?”

“I think..." It sounds like he’s getting up and taking a few steps towards the open door.

I slide down, picking up my backpack and pulling out the remote control from behind my back. Go ahead, man, you won't have time to make a noise! A kilo of explosives behind your back, it’ll be enough!

“Who is that?!”

“Who could it be?” another voice opposes. “The guys downstairs can't get in here, the door is locked! If they were going we would have heard them.”

A click and a ray of light scans the flight that leads upstairs. I barely have time to hide my head, and the ray passes over it.

“I guess it was nothing…”

He's still standing there for a while, and then I hear the sound of footsteps.

Gone?

I wait for a couple more minutes for the chatter to resume. But I lay in wait a little more.

And I was right!

A beam of light once again scans the stairs. He, the scary mutt, hasn't gone anywhere, he's standing there! And who's talking then? Well, it is quite possible that there is someone else there. This time the steps sound quite different. It seems like he's really leaving...

Getting to the third floor, I take a breath. Wow, even have a shiver! No, in this state I'm not up for war. I sit down on the floor and remove the flask from of my backpack. A sip, and a heat fills my body. Cognac. It's good that I took some with me!

My teeth stop knocking, and now I can somewhat gather my thoughts. Look at the clock. Shift in forty minutes. Well, let's wait... I could hear the steps of the changing guardwell from here. No wonder, because I'm separated from them by just an apartment door. They passed me... Now they are on the second floor. So they need a few more seconds to get to the apartment where they have the nest.

My finger presses the button!

The rattle of the double explosion hitsmy ears even all the way on the third floor! What is happening downstairs now is hard to imagine.

Simultaneous detonation of two-kilogram charges on the chimney and at the entrance,it's now a mixture of a madhouse and a dead house. I hope that the arriving guards were scattered on the stairs, and those that were sleeping inside thoroughly got hit on the ears. Yeah, and now the entrance is open from the street. Those who leave from the guardhouse will not be able to ignore that.

A simple conclusion. They attacked the guardroom and simultaneously blew up the door to get in. Why? Well, I think you can figure that out if you're drunk.

I'm thinking allthis on the move.

Here is the apartment door I need. I have already twisted off the lock in advance, and the door is held only on a splinter I slipped under. Opening it is a minute's business.

Now we go quietly! Although my inner voice is screaming, demanding to run as fast as possible. After all, Foma's guards will rush from above, dragging their boss to his secret shelter.
I can't run away!

There is no need to make any noise, the guards in the shelter aren't sleeping. They listen very carefully to everything that is happening at the door. Having got out on the balcony, I throw over my backpack and climb over myself. Now I'm on the balcony through which you can enter the apartment next to the shelter.

That's the door...

It's a common door, not even metal.

The lock has long been twistedoff, the apartment has already been thoroughly searched. And now the door is just closed with nails, I checked earlier. I even pulled out a couple of them. In fact, it is only held on one nail. A rush and it will open.

I listen.

Feet stomping! They are coming!

My ZIG is ready, I'll shoot right through the door, there's hardly any

distance.

A call, that’sthe security guard in the shelter asking something of the people arriving. An irritated voice answers. A lock clinks, the door is open.

Let's go!

I hit them with short bursts, moving the barrel left to right. I lower it, some of them could have fallen to the floor.

Change my magazine...

There's screaming on the other side of the door, somebody's shooting. Didn't I get a hit off?

A move, and a grenade flies into the slightly opened door. I jump behind the wall.

Boom!

That got my ears pretty hard...

The second one!

If I open my mouth, it's less deafening.

Boom!

Now... now I have to come out. There are no options, I am simply obliged to control everything. Someone could be still alive and unharmed. Everyone got hit with the blastwave, that’s not debatable. And I have some advantage, for now. Right at the door I bump into a body and my finger immediately presses the trigger. They say it's called a control shot. Let it be so. There are no wounded, no victims here, only enemies in varying degrees of combat readiness. If they were me, none of them would even think for a second.

And that is why I will shoot. All of them. Lying, standing, sitting, hanging in the air. Living and not so much.

There shouldn't be a single survivor here!
Change my magazine...

It's time!

Now the surviving guards are coming.

The door to the shelter is open, on the threshold is the body of a man in a decent suit. Foma?

Who fucking knows, we weren't introduced.

The ZIG is twitching in my hands. Maybe you had nine lives like a cat. But with your head gone it won't help much now. I pick up a bag from the floor, I'll check the contents when I have the time.

Down!

And here's the collapsed flight.

I throw a rope folded twice over the railing, grasp at both ends and slip down. Jerk with one end, the rope falls down. Now fuck if they're gonna know what way the shooter headed. There are no traces left! Looking out on to the street I don't run anywhere, I roll over the curb and look around. From the first entrance I can see the rays of flashlights. They have heard the explosions and shots and are hurrying to help their leader.

There's no problem in getting a burst off at them. I'm sure I can put somebody down.

And why?

Give out my location? So that this whole group of people would attack me? Like I have nothing else to do. No, the hero in an action movie would have shot everybody here. And then, purring with greed, carried off a mountain of trophies. Yeah, he would have been carrying it off to his grave, this isn't an action movie!

The way out of the basement is on the other side. So, there is no worry of having villains appear behind my back. And if they do, then I pull back. Having already made it fifty meters from the house I lay down again and look around. Where I came from, I can see lights, people are trying to find someone. You are welcome! You don't have any dogs, and all the night patrols go into the house for the night. You don't have anyone outside. So finding me isn't going to happen.

Everything is done, Ican go. Having found a pack of cartridges in my backpack, I fill a magazine. Another pack...

Okay, now I can feel less confident, because I only have the ammunition in my submachine gun, I've already shot everything else. In case of some trouble I would have had to use my pistol. Well, and grenades, although there isn't many of them left.

Having filled two magazines, I pull back a little more. Having looked around, I move to where Mityai is dancing with impatience.

"Hey…"

Who the hell is that?

Shit, there's a guy buried around here somewhere!

"Who are you?"
"Oleg…"

"A leg?"

Despite the seriousness of the moment the stranger smiles, I can see in the eyepieces of the night vision that his lips are in a grin.

“Funny.”

“Why are they doing this to you?”

“Issues with Foma.”

“And who are you? A scav?”

“Haven't gotten thatwild yet. I was a technician, I did some useful things.”

I sit down and take out my knife tocut the ropes entangling the man.

“Can you get out yourself?”

“Hmm... I'll try…”

“Have this knife. Dig! You can return it later.”

I move aside and get the house in my sights. I'll cover this guy just in case, too.

One minute... another...

“Got it!”

“Throw the knife here.”

He doesn't really see me, so he throws the blade towards my voice. I bend over and lift it from the ground. Wipe it on my jacket and put it in the sheath.

“Move towards the houses.”

“To the left?”

“Yeah, exactly. They are waiting for us there…”

Whether that’s true or not, he can't know. But let him think about how to behave just in case.

Chapter 17

Mityai met us with his weapons out, he had even pulled a knife out from the sheath and stuck it in his boot.

“Who's that?”

“Friendly, Mityai! Denis…”

“Who's with you?”
“I dug this one up…”

The bandit shakes his head.

“You shouldn’t have! Fomawill get mad!”

“He’s welcome to! Will he come back from the dead? I don't give a fuck…”

“Fuck... did you kill him?”

“With all his closest people.”

I describe the man in the grey suit to him.

“Was there a tie?”

“A striped one, why?”

“That was him! That tie was his signature! It wasn’t just for looks, he also was always hiding a blade in it... Well, dude, you really surprised me!”

Oleg, listening to us, asks: “So... you killed him, yeah?”

“Well, no one has ever managed to live without a head. Oh, by the way! What kind of sins were you buried for?”

“Hey, guys, let's cut the shit!” Mityai interrupts. “We gotta run! How about you, coming with us?”

The recently sentenced man shrugs.

“Sure…”

“Then let’s blow this joint.”

* * *

Kaban sat down on the curb near the entrance to the building and threw a gloomy glance at the bandits from the late Foma’s guard running up to him.

“Lorick!” Without turning his head, he calls out to the oldest in his entourage.

“I’m here!”

“Take someone with good eyes and walk around.”

“Will do!”

After sending his trusted men to find out what had happened, he turned to the house’s security. He was quite sure of his guys. If any of the locals saw anything, his guys would find out. They will ask who they need to ask, turn the whole house upside down, but they will find out the truth. Well, while they're out there, he can listen to these geeks. Showing a clear distrust of what the guards of his former boss would say, he secretly asserted his supremacy. He had been Foma’s closest assistant, that's true! But not the only one, and not the most influential. The struggle for power promised to be serious, and he had to projectcoolness and resoluteness. And also, foresight and a remarkable mind! A simple thug would not be trusted with the most important position,the ability to shoot isn’t the only measure!

“Who’s senior here? Report!” Kaban demanded of the group.

Kabandidn’t see Ronnie, Foma’s close friend who was in charge the security.

“So… Ronnie died. He got blown up… splattered against the wall," replied one of the bandits in front of him.

“How did that happen?”

“Well…" one of the locals came forward. “He was sleeping. It was chilly at night, and he was lying by the stove. And then…”

The hole in place of the window where the pipe used to be finishes his sentence for him.

“So… What happened next?”

“So… The shift had only just left. I got up, threw some wood in the fire, Ronnie scolded me, saying I was disturbing his sleep! Then Gordeich and I went out for cigarettes on to the stairs. But I had to walk back to get a new pack of matches, I ran out. And Gordeich stayed…”

“At the door?”

“Yeah! There…”

“Then what happened?”

“It took a while to find the matches, so I had to shake down the whole place. That’s whenit hit! I flew into the wall! Ronnie hit it with his head. He died right there. And Gordeich… He was torn to shreds, couldn’t find all of him!”

“Sit down!” Kaban shows some mercy and nods at a nearby stone. “Did you say you were shell-shocked?”

“Yeah... Everything sounds like I’m under a mattress... And my legs don't listen.”

The chief’slieutenant looked around at the guards standing in front of him. Some of them looked very frayed and heavily injured.

“Have a seat, everyone!”

“So," continued the man, “there was a lot of noise, screaming... smoke, dark, couldn’t see for shit... until Mosol came running. And then I don't know... I was cleaning up, pulling out the guys... My hands were shaking!”

“Okay, I don’t have any further questions for you!” Kaban nodded.
“Where’s Mosol?”

“Here I am.”Another bandit stands up. This one looked more or less intact, and stood quite firmly on his feet. And he spoke calmly, wasn’t in any rush.

“Well?”

“I was coming down from the roof. I went to take a leak in an apartment. Ronnie was mad at us for that, but nobody was allowed outside at night! I'm not pissing off the roof, am I?”
“I don’t care. Anything related to the point?”

“There was a hell of a burst! I thought there was one explosion. Then, when I ran downstairs, I saw two holes. Everybody who was walking from above was there. So much fucking blood... And in the apartment,couldn’t tell who was alive and who was dead. Fucking smoke... The lamps all broke. Until we found flashlights,we were as blind as kittens!”

The bandit shook his head. It was obvious that even he was impressed by what had transpired.

“What was it? Maybe someone brought something inside?”

“No..." Mosol shook his head. “The bricks from the window flew inside. They hurt the boys plenty. And the bags at the door were torn to shreds, the entire staircase was covered in sand! The explosion was from the street!”

The lieutenant nodded, the picture was starting to add up. Mosol continued.

“I picked someone up. I told them to take their guns and watch so that someone wouldn't get in from the street. And then, a minute or two later, it hit again, but quieter. That was grenades being thrown around at Foma’s shelter. I split the guys, five went to the street, and six people went upstairs. But they didn’t find anyone living…”

“That’s it?”

“Well... yeah... The boys didn't see or hear anybody upstairs, it’s nighttime, isn't it? And it was quiet underground.”

“Not much.” Kaban rises from his seat. “Come on, show me everything.”

But he didn't find anything new on the scene. Blood stains, torn clothes and a long row of bodies lying in front of the building.

“How many were killed?”

“Seventeen people, including Foma’sclosest. And a dozen injured.”

Yes... the guests were a harsh bunch! They obviously didn’t come here to joke around. The lieutenantdutifully visited all the places where his comrades had died, but he hadn't voiced any conclusions. He was waiting for Lorick.

Lorick appeared a couple of hours later and looked extremely puzzled. When Kaban noticed this, he nodded to him that he wanted to speak alone.

They sat down together on a bench that had survived from the previous life. The guards were looking around vigilantly.

“Here’s the thing…" Lorick draws intricate figures on the sand. “It wasn’t one person.”

“Where did you get that from?”

“One charge was suspended from the stove pipe. And it was sticking out high above ground, almost three meters! One person couldn't reach it, and he couldn't get upstairs unnoticed, the post on the roof would see. And there isn't one anywhere near…”
“So, two of them?”

“On the street definitely! And there was someone inside too. The bitch, he treated it like home! He ate there, we found crumbs. Heeven slept!”

“The man's nerves must be iron... Where did he stay?”

“There.” Kaban’s henchman pointed. “On the third floor. The windows overlook us. There he slept too, lefthis mat.”

“And nobody saw him?”

Lorick only shrugged.

“We have to assume he put a charge on the door. Unlike the bags, the doors flew outward. So the explosion was between the bags and the doors, no other way!”

“And again, no one saw him... Next!”

“They must have known about the shelter and waited for Foma there. They understood that in case of anything he would be taken there. Then everything is simple. They threw in grenades and killed all the survivors.

Even the dead were shot, control shots! Professionals... the motherfuckers!"

Kaban looked towards the house. They had started carrying out the bodies of the leader's henchmen. Until the end of the inspection, they had not been touched.

"Tough…"

"Foma had his head blown off, shot at point-blank range more than once."

"Survivors, as I understand…"

"No one. There was one guy who lost half his leg in the explosion, and even he was shot several times. It's obvious that he wasn't gonna survive, but nope, fuck that."

Lorick threw away the twigs he was drawing on the ground with.

"I think it was one or two people, no more. Shots were fired right through the closed door from the apartment across the hall. Apparently, another person threw grenades from above or below and the other one fired. And then they both went somewhere. The guys who ran up from below didn't see or hear anyone."

"Are you saying they could be somewhere in the building?"

"I don't think so."The bandit shook his head. "Ronnie's guys wanted to punish one dude, so they buried him to his chest over there!"

Lorick pointed to the right. Kaban followed his hand and nodded with understanding.

"So, in the morning, he was gone. He couldn't have gotten out himself. And the ropes were also found, they were cut with a knife. Most likely someone saw him and took him with them."

“So the ones on the street were the ones that took him…”

“Well... Would you still hang around in the house after that?”

“I don't think so... I wouldn't have gone in the first place!”

“And also…” Lorick reached into his pocket. “Look…”

There were bullets in his palm, about a dozen of them, flattened. On their heads were traces of blue paint.

“I picked them up from the floor... there were a lot of them,”he said, anticipating the chief's question. “Some of them have passed right through, that's why they are so crumpled. I also examined the casings—the marking is the same everywhere.”

“Is it like this?” A whole cartridge with a blue bullet appeared in front of his eyes.

“Yes. Where did you get this?”

“Well... someone gave it to me. With a hint!”

“So…” Lorick jumped up on his feet. “We gotta take him out!”

“Sit down!” Kaban waves. “Foma wasn’t any stupider than you. He was going to do just that, made a claim. And where is Foma now?”

“What fucking kind of a guy is that?! To attacka lawful vor!”

“Fuck knows... nobody has ever seen him. Predator of some kind... We don't know where he hangs, who he walks under. He doesn't show himself, but he sends greetings like that…"Kaban nods at the handful of wrinkled bullets. “Do you remember Kiryukha?”

“Well, sure! An honest vor.”

“They took him outin his crib, in a closed room, in front of his neighbor. Doors, windows, everything closed! And the boy who survived didn’t see anything either. Kiryukha twitched, so they stuck a gun barrel to the back of his head. They whispered not to act a fool… Would you have started waving your arms and legs in this case?”

“Well… no, probably…”

“And he didn't. Gavrish was also approached like that, from behind, whispering. They came to Gavrish's place! He was sitting in the shitter, can you imagine?! And again nobody saw anything… Where would we look for something him?! Catch the wind in a field? Consider, they had to answer by today! Here is the answer! And what am I supposed to do now?”

Chapter 18

As we walk home, I explain to Mityai that his excessive knowledge of Foma's circumstances of death could serve him badly in the future. Who's to say that one of the deceased thief's accomplices wouldn't want to avenge his death. No matter how you twist it, he is directly involved in it. So... it's better to hide your pride and keep quiet about the whole thing. And my boss, for his part, will find a way to pay him back for this. He obviously likes the last part, so he asks me to get him a good shotgun. And there was something else, of course, but it was within reason. It won't hurt me too much, so I nod and promise to bring these suggestions to my leadership as soon as possible. That's good... let Kaban and his gang look for the unknown villains everywhere.

Having settled this issue, I remember Oleg. He's dutifully stomped along in the distance, not making any attempt to get away. I haven't really decided myself what to do with him yet. I pulled him out of the improvised prison/grave on impulse, no specific ideas on what to do. And now, when there is no need to hurry, I can think... Optimally, I'd put a bullet in his head and then leavehim here. After all, he is a witness! And though he knows much less than Mityai, he doesn't have any reason to stay silent. He will talk somewhere and boom, the show's over!

Maybe just kill and dump him, huh? I share these thoughts with Mitya, and he agrees with me.

"I'll snuff him out myself! We'll use a knife, he won't even have time to notice! He will die well…"

"Agreed. I'm just gonna talk to him first... maybe there'ssomething useful he can tell use before he dies? He was put in that pit for something, wasn't he?"

We stop to rest.

We climb up to the third floor of a residential building, Mityai has a spot here. There is a burner, water, and some supplies. While he is warming up the water, I call Oleg aside with a nod.

“You and I are walking next to each other, and nobody knows anything about you. Would you like to share, huh?”

I catch Mityai’s gesture with the edge of my eye, gesturing to let him talk…

“Well…" Oleg scratches the back of his head. “I mean... I was a technician, I used to build all sorts of systems for Terra Group…”

According to him, the beginning of the mess caught him at one of the facilities he was serving. On the very first day the guards locked him and his two comrades in a room, threw some rations and left them a bucket of water. And that’s it, he didn’t see any of them again. It was as if they disappeared.

“We hung out there while there was food. Then we began to think... kicked the door down and got out. No one and nothing, all the other doors were locked. Steel... unbreakable!”

“You’re a technician! Didn't you know how to open them?”

“I do. I need a special key card. But we had only a basic access one, for service. It doesn’t open locks. You can walk in all sorts of utility rooms and that’s it. Ventilation, water, but not locks.”

There was water at the facility, so death from thirst wasn’t a threat. But there was nothing to eat. Therefore, after discussing, the trio decided to run. But it wasn’t that easy! As soon as they tried to get out of the door and made it fifty feet, a disguised automatic machine-gun turret opened fire. Oleg's two comrades were dead right there, he was saved only by the fact that he had time to jump back into the doorway, which had not yet closed completely. He went looking again, trying to open all the doors he had passed. Only in the basement was he lucky enough to break the door tothe

shift leader's room. It turned out to be wooden. He sat there the rest of the time with what was left of the food.

"There was light there. And aradio. Sometimes I could hear someone. But some commands, a code... Who can tell what a Charlie is, what an 'echo' is, and what they all want from each other?"

Then the food began to run out, so the question arose—what next? Live here? But how?! The place was some kind of storage facility, a one-story building with solid walls. However, there was more than one floor, the stairs led somewhere. But Oleg couldn't open these doors. There was only one exit, and it was guarded with an automatic machine gun. None of the technicians had even seen the thing before, and knew nothing about its existence. Apparently, it was simply not turned on in peacetime. Having searched the tables, Oleg managed to find instructions, which said that there was more than one turret. All approaches to the building are covered, there are no dead zones. And in addition to a solid stock of ammunition there was some more unpleasant news—upon exhaustion of the ammunition, an order may be given to detonate the entire building. "Living on top of a gunpowder barrel wasn't great, but he couldn't do anything about the defense system.

He could come out and stand by the door, the machine gun didn't fire there. But that's it. It was just fifty meters to the nearest hideout, but there was no chance of crossing that space unscathed. Yet extraordinary circumstances make you think, and a way out was found.He dragged the technicians' beds out of the room, managed to climb up to the roof and drag them with him. He assembled an improvised tower, climbed on it and threw a hook made from the very same beds on the wires above the building. He tried to move along the wire beyond the firing distance. The whole structure fell apart from the push, and he managed to make it only forty meters, after which he was dangling, stuck.

"How I got out... I don't remember. I came to my senses only when I was on the ground."

And after a few days of wandering he was found by Foma's bandits. Striving to bargain for his life, he told them everything he knew.

"I wish I had been killed right there!"

Foma ordered his men to confirm the story. The advance group of bandits was killed by machine gun fire, the turrets worked perfectly. When trying to pass the way Oleg got out, it turned out that the machine guns can shoot upwards! The wires were cut by the bullets, and those who fell to the ground were finished off.

Foma was furious! Not wanting to hear any excuses, he gave the technician two days to think about how to disable the turrets.

"So I was buried in a pit…"

I make a sign to Mityai to wait, I stand up and get Foma's bag out of my backpack.

"Look, is your card in here?"

Oleg, having thought about it for a couple of seconds, pulls out a stack of cards. They are of different colors. Red, like platinum, and yellow like gold. He pulls out the red one.

"This one… has a number on it. B34-776-11 is our group. The last number represents our team. The first team of the life support service. And the number one is for the support system. Water, air, and electricity."

"And the letter?"

"I think this is the category and number of the object. B is an object of the second class. Numbers are the serial number. But about the rest I'm not sure, I'm sorry…"

"Okay, I see. What do you think you're gonna do next? The city is an

absurd mess, I assume you've already figured that out…”

The technician nods sadly.

“I don't know... As I understand it, it doesn't make sense to go home? Shops don't work, so where do you get food?”
“Like him,” I nod at Mitya, “you earn food with a gun.”

Oleg smiles sadly again.

“No chance.. In a shooting gallery I hittwo times out of ten.”

“Army?”

“I didn’t serve.”

Yeah... a strange character. In battle he was little help, a burden. I won't say I'm some amazing specialist, but at least I learned to shoot! And this one? What to do with him?

“Did you only work at this facility?”

“No, of course not! There are a lot of them in the city! We were given a new card at the office every time. Get in the car and off we go! The team could never hold cards for two different places at a time!”

“And how many teams are there?”

He digs through Foma’s bag again and placesasimilar card in front of me.

B34-776-23.

“And what does it mean?”

“The same object. The third logistics team. If we had such a team there, the doors to the warehouse could open. Then maybe I would have found

food... I have never seen a number higher than three. And we hardly ever crossed paths with other brigades, that was discouraged. I think that there were like a hundred... for the whole city."

"Vital systems, logistics... was there anything else?"

"There is definitely a communications team. I assume defense systems are served by someone, but I don't know anything about them. I only learned about them now!"

So... this dude is very useful! It is not necessary to stab such a valuable person under his rib.

I approach Mitya.

"I have an idea... Let him live for now. I'll show him to the bosses, I think they will have a couple of questions. They have a strange desire to find out why this whole mess started. And he sat at the radio the whole time and heard a lot. Let them gut him!"

"It's a pity!" My guide sighs. "I was getting riled up!"

"He isn't the last one to come our way. There will be others, I'm not giving you any orderson them! It's not too far from home so I'll get there myself. And I will put in a good word with Gavrish! I will tell him that you got me home, as agreed! And don't forget, the day after tomorrow I'm expecting you at Khokhol's!"

"Okay!" My ominous companion finishes his tea quickly, puts the burner in his bag, and disappears right in front of our eyes.

I walk towards Oleg.

"So! Sit here, quietly! If you say a word, they can cut out your tongue in half a second!"

Who can understand him, this figure... Now Foma and I are settled, and who can read the thoughts in the head of this strange man? And not just strange, let's not pretend, he's terrifying!

It's getting dark outside, now I have some advantage—I can see at night, but Mityai can't. I don't trust him right now. My equipment more than compensates for what he's promised. And the glory of the one who dealt with Foma guarantees respect from many people. However, hatred from others is also guaranteed.

Mityai... well, he's an obvious scumbag, turned on by murders! Who was chomping at the bit to kill Oleg? Almost shaking at the idea! I wait, listening to rustles. The technician was affected by the seriousness of the moment, almost not breathing.

I make a sign to him and carefully sneak into the corridor. If this killer hasn't noticed where we've gone, there's a chance.

It's never quiet here. Some breeze or draft rolls empty tin cans on the ground. Doors and windows creak in the wind. I was very surprised when I discovered that there was almost never dead silence, always something making noise. And almost any person hiding in ambush sooner or later gives himself away with some careless movement. However, the same can be said about us. Well, I've already learned to hide, but Oleg...

I've got a tape measure in my hands that's been stripped of all the extraneous stuff. There is no microphone on it either. I hold it in my hands and gently pull the flexible tape forward. It doesn't go right away, gets caught on something, gets stuck, and I have to start all over again. There it is... Now I can start. Press and then let go of the button!

The ribbon clanks, winding off under the influence of the spring. Some pebbles rustle. Sounds like someone jumped and laid low. I wait for a couple of minutes. And again: press, then let go of the button. The person has progressed a little bit more. Pause again. Somewhere nearby a barely audible sound appears, but quite distinct. Wow, Mitay can move like that? I

didn't know... The technician breathes hotly next to me. He is excited and very scared, his excitement is infectious. I hold my breath for a minute, so now it's easier. Press and then let go! That's it, a couple of meters left. But the unknown opponent has moved too. I can't hear his breath, but I can imagine the location of this "friend." There is a small fence in front of me, protecting some house. He was there... behind the fence. Press, let go! Click. A grenade ignition capsule! It's not Mityai, he doesn't use those! I force Oleg to the ground and hide myself by the ledge. Where will the grenade fall?!

Boom... There's a ringing in my ears, circles in front of my eyes. But there is no pain, nothing is screaming. Missed? Apparently the grenade fell right before the opening I was sitting in. There's a hole in the ground. The grenade, I think, rolled down there. The tape measure, by the way, is torn to shreds—an ugly disfigured tip of the torn ribbon sticks out of a plastic box. The edges are sharp, probably, from shards of shrapnel.

Chapter 19

In movies, I'd moan now. Like, poor me, I'm hurt! Yeah, and another explosive gift will come towards the sound. No, let him come here with his legs and check everything! We keep silent, to show there are no living people here. Oleg in a panic, tries to jump up. I point to the rifle and the technician shyly shrinks to the corner. The man's scared... Well, where are you? Light! A bright beam slides across the eyepieces of the device and I'm immediately blinded. The smart deviceturns off. Click, and the night vision is up. The beam of the flashlight dances in the breach!

"Let's go!"
So, he is not alone?! Well, guys, you're not the only one with grenades! I throw one in the aisle. And the second one... it flies through the wall. But it is not destined to fall to the ground. Having unscrewed the fuse, I tied it with a strong thread. I wrapped the thread around the grenade. I hid it like that in my tactical vest. The thread doesn't interfere with flying and exploding. But when the thread is unwound, it keeps the grenade from falling to the ground. The explosion happens above the targets, and the shrapnel flies in all directions, and much further than it would if it fell on the ground. The explosion of the first grenade will make all the survivors fall to the ground, and then the grenade will blow up above them. And the area occupied by a lying person is much larger than that of when he's standing or crouching. So everyone will get some... And they did, someone shouts behind the wall!

There was still a cloud of dust in the air when I jumped up to the breach. The same flashlight that made my night vision turn off was now uselessly lighting the wall. But just in case, I let out a short burst in its direction. Jump to the side! A dark figure is trying to get up on its feet, grabbing at the wall. Well, no! I didn't invite you here! And I didn't start throwing grenades first either! The ZIG coughs and the man folds in half.

And where is the second one? This man didn't shout to himself, did he? Suddenly sparks shoot from my eyes, and, losing my weapon, I fall to the

side. Apparently I blacked out for a while, because when my consciousness returned to me, I was being shaken, with words and blows accompanying the shaking.

“You bitch!”

Bam! Sparks from my eyes.

“I wish you were dead!”

Bam! Again.

“I'll wrap your guts on the fence now!”

I wouldn't like that...

I can't see the screaming face, but I can understand that the man is much stronger than I am, and God hadn’t skimped when giving him strength. He's jerking me around, seems like the only thing he’s not doing is folding me in half. Taking advantage of the fact that the man was too carried away by the punching, I gently reach towards my hip holster, where there's a pistol. It's dark, and there’s a chance that he won't notice.

Something crunches, and the strong hand raises me above the ground.

“I'll fucking put you on the stake!”

Suddenly something hits the man on the back. He opens his hand and turns abruptly. I drop to the ground.

Oleg is standing in the opening in the breached wallwith a stone in his raised hand. Or something similar, in the light of the moon it is impossible to see for sure. He throws it quickly and misses! Well, taking into account his military talents, it’s surprising that he managed to him the first time! My opponent angrily growls. Now he's going to smackthe technician like he’s a bug, their weight categories are simply incomparable.

But I already have the gun in my hand!

Shots clap deafly!

I hear clicks of bullets bouncing and flying off in all directions—the enemy is wearing a bulletproof vest!

But they still push him pretty hard, and the man loses his balance.

The armor does not cover the legs, does it?

I lower the gun.

Bam!

An angry scream shakes the neighborhood—ahit!

Another shot, another...

I roll away, the chest pain makes me cough, and my sight is off. The bullet flies away into the dark with a scream, ricocheting off the wall. The dark figure straightens out. So it's like that? It turns out that you can still walk? With a shot leg?

Bam! Bam! Bam!

And with two shot legs?

I hurry to shoot the rest of my ammunition in his direction. I don't know where I hit him, if at all. I change my magazine... At the place where the enemy fell, flashes go off, and bullets are screaming over my head with a nasty noise. He is alive, armed, and still capable of fighting. He still wants to kill me.

This sucks...

My night vision device lies somewhere in the dark, and so does my ZIG. The grenades are gone, and the backpack with the explosives is too far away for me to use it. There is a gun and three magazines. No advantages, I see as badly as my opponent in the dark. Yeah, he's hurt, but I got hit in the head. And when I try to breathe, my chest starts to hurt. Did he break my rib or something?

A click!

He still has grenades!

The explosion goes off behind my back, some crap fell around me, but the shards, thank the Gods, didn't hit me. I crawl aside in a hurry.

Boom!

Does he have a warehouse of them?

The window!

There isn't glass, I guess it was all blown out by the explosions. I pull up with my arms and drop over the windowsill. Now he can at least use a truck of grenades, the walls here are strong, no fragments can take them.

This isn't a residential building, it's some kind of office. The long corridor, which overlooks the window, turns to the side a little. That suits me, I can get close to this villain. The first door isn't what I need. Neither is the second. The third isn't right either, the window mightbe right over the very place where we fought. And the client is now wary, any rustle will be noticed like a church bell. It will probably mean a grenade through the window.

Another door.

Locked, as one would expect. I take out my knife and simply cut through it.

Modern office door, plastic on an aluminum frame. Knife cuts right through! Just don't make any noise! I climb into the room. Now to the window! Carefully, trying to walk as quietly as possible, I climb up to the windowsill. Pressing against the wall, I look out the window.

There is no one here! Visibility is not very good, but in the moonlight you can see the empty street. Wow... And where is my opponent? I definitely hit him, he even yelled in pain!

I don't see Oleg either, I hope he had time to hide somewhere. He was brave! Going against a big guy with just a stone? Worthwhile action! But that's for later. Now there is a more important issue! Where could my opponent have disappeared to? Ran away? Well... maybe...

But something tells me that's not true, he's not that kind of guy! If we split up now, the chances of finding me in the future are extremely low. It is obvious that these dudes have nothing to do with Mityai, our meeting is a pure coincidence. The bandit probably knew something about this place, so he tried to get out of here as soon as possible. And I was sitting here, waiting for the right moment. And look where that got me! I try to think through this way and that, but I can't figure it out. Where, and most importantly, why, did he go? For help? I probably would have. But that's me, and he probably has his reasons. No, he didn't go for help...

Crunch... It came from the hallway, and I am immediately coveredin cold sweat! It's the glass by the window I climbed in through! This man is walking in my footsteps! Another fifteen meters and he will see the door that I cut. He won't come in, he'll just throw grenades.

The window lock didn't work at once, which probably gave me a few gray hairs. I climb through the window, start to move down, and my pistol falls to the rocks with a ring, disappearing somewhere in the dark! You idiot, you should have put it in a holster! Not behind the belt, like an action movie! Saw too many stupid movies, dumbass that I am… I jump, and the acute pain makes me sit down. Shit, he broke my rib!

Bam! Glass flies out from the window above my head with a ring. This is not the time to look for weapons, now this guy will look into the office, and then stick out to the street. And then grenades will fly. Somehow, limping on the leg I twisted, I move towards the breach where I came out. I have an idea... There were no more explosions, but there are shots. The bullets are buzzing over my head. Too late, I'm already behind the rocks. The ricochets rattle and then there is relative silence.

Relative because I hear my opponent. Or rather, I hear his footsteps. Against my expectation, he moves relatively normally. Apparently the wounds were not serious enough to significantly restrict his movements. The villain doesn't throw grenades, so he must've run out. But he has a gun, and I just saw that. The moon suddenly hides behind a cloud and it becomes much darker. But my opponent doesn't slow down too much. And that's quite understandable, he has an idea where I'm sitting. On the right is the corridor, but you still have to get there somehow. Five meters, he will shoot before I get there. Running to the left will take even longer. And straight ahead is thirty meters of open space, a small area. Probably the former parking lot of the office, whose door I so ruthlessly disfigured. Running to the parking lot would be supremely stupid. He'll shoot me there without batting an eye.

There's a pile of rocks down here, which I'm hiding behind now. And he knows about that, he saw where I dove. There was a chance to crawl by quietly, but not too big of a chance. Given the animal-level instincts of my opponent, crawling isn't an option: he'd hear me immediately. I hear steps as the sand creaks under his shoe soles. One more stepand he can see almost everything. A couple of steps, and my shelter will be fully visible. He takes another step. Something crackles under his foot.

I get down on my knee. My finger is pressing the button... And in the bright ray of the under-barrel flashlight I can see the massive figure of my opponent. Yes, I have the assault rifle in my hands, the same one that blinded my night vision device. But now it's in my hands! I ran after it and that's why I laid down in such an uncomfortable position.

My opponent's covering his face with his hand, which, by the way, holds my pistol! He's blinded, but he's an experienced soldier and his confusion won't be long. That's okay, enough time for me! Aiming. Boom! The AK is twitching in my hands, the villain is thrown back. I press the trigger, but I can only hear a click. I pull the bolt, press the trigger again and hear nothing but a click. What the fuck? Judging by the weight, the assault rifle is loaded! And the former owner didn't shoot it...

The villain turns around, rises. His right hand hangs limply, seems I hit him well! But he is still alive! I shorten the distance in two jumps and use the buttstock to hit my opponent. Even without bullets the rifle does not stop being a weapon! It has almost four kilograms of weight! And the enemy immediately feels it!

Another blow! He's still alive, he's wheezing something... A hit! The buttstock breaks and I use whatever I can to hit my enemy. Again! On his head! That's it... My legs bend down, and I sink right to the ground where I stood. Rustle... I turn my head, exhausted. I'm no fighter now, I can't even escape. Oleg. He holds my submachine gun in his hands.

"Why didn't you shoot?"

"I tried, pressed, but nothing happens!"

"Give it here…"

Well, naturally! It's out of bullets, and he didn't think to turn over the double magazine.

"Oaf... Look!"

I'm reloading my guns and, at the same time, I'm showing the technician how to do it. I pick up my own gun and this time I stick it in the holster! Enough of my stupid experiments!

"Look around, pick up a weapon, we need to find you something. Enough

walking around empty-handed…”

He nods, disconnects the barrel light from the assault rifle, and goes somewhere. And me... I'm trying to come to my senses. What the fuck? Why are they attacking us at all?! By the way, who was that? I lean over the body of the enemy. A bear's paw on an arm chevron? Bears? I don't understand, I didn't fight with them! What did they attack us for? Or do they not give a fuck who they kill? An unpleasant surprise... But I'll put armored plates into my vest now! It might be harder to run and jump, but it's worth it! My bullets bounced off this man, huh?

There were three attackers. One of them, I suppose, was killed by a grenade, the other one was stunned and slightly hit with shrapnel. I only finished him off later. By the way, a lesson for the future! I filled the spare magazines, but forgot about the main one! That's where the bullets ran out! Idiot!

I also found a night vision device, it didn't break in the fall. Only the shotgun of the first victim remained suitable from among the captured weapons. Next to a pile of stones, we picked up a machine gun that had previously belonged to my enemy. By the way, when I examined it, I found out why he threw it away, the bullet belt was broken by shrapnel and it jammed when it was served. And the assault rifle I picked up did not shoot for a completely stupid reason, the magazinegotbent when it fell, so the cartridges got stuck. Maybe if I had acted more coolly, all I would have had to do was pull out the magazine, shake it, and put it back in. And everything would have worked. But I wasn’t a cold-blooded fighter in this situation...

We took the barrel flashlight from the assault rifle, everything else was hopelessly ruined. And from the owner's body we borrowed ammunition and a knife. I put the big man's flak jacket on the technician, and he didn’t object. I gave him the shotgun with cartridges and made him carry the machine gun. I could barely put on my own backpack, how could I carry so much stuff? The pistol of the opponent also went on Oleg’s belt. Though the technician warned me right away, he does not know this weapon at all! It’s

okay, he will get used to it...

He dragged the trophy bag too, but there wasn't much useful stuff. Just some little things. I used up the whole stock of bandages on myself. I had enough scratches and abrasions! My rib was broken, so I had to bandage my chest. They say it isn't the smartest decision, but I couldn't think of anything else.

Chapter 20

By the way, it turned out that not only my bullets hit the big guy, my grenade fragments tattered him a bit too. Oleg picked up two empty syringes, morphine or something very similar. Since at the moment of our fight with him there were no other living opponents, only one person could have used this stuff, the machine gunner. That's why this moose behaved like that! He simply didn't feel pain! But we couldn't move quickly anymore. Me because I was hurt, and Oleg because he was afraid of everything in the world. He wouldn't move three steps away from me. The weapons didn't help, the technician held his shotgun like a broom. He didn't seem to have much idea what he had to do if necessary. What had happened to him in the last few days has scared the man out of his mind!

We barely made it about a kilometer and a half. Gavrish's gang's checkpoint should be somewhere nearby. But it's not the most reasonable idea to go there right now. I hope that Mityai has already got there and brought the "happy" news to whom it was necessary. And if not? But Foma's emissaries were there, and who knows how they would behave in this situation?

So, we should take a break. Nothing else to do. The resting place was found in the usual way, by breaking the door of some office. Another office for a company robbing a bunch of suckers, while for some unknown reason thinking of themselves as the salt of the earth. The slogan "Everything you want for your money!" could easily hang over the door of any place like this. I remember some of my acquaintances from my past life. Some of them tried so hard to get into offices like this, claiming that in the near future they would be having lunch at the same table as Bill Gates himself. Others, barely holding back their laughter, took money off the first.

The situation here should be standard. Simple furniture for the ordinary staff, and a leather sofa with a bar for the boss. Another faker. I wasn't worried about the staff's things, but the office of the boss would be very useful now! There would be a place to lie down and some snacks could still be left. We opened the entrance and a couple of adjacent doors, and at the

same time we turn over a couple of boxes, scattering their contents along the corridor. Let it be visible from afar that there is nothing else to see here. Everything is already stolen, walk past.

And sure, there was a leather sofa in the recreation room. There was also a bar with a fridge that wasn't working. Having slipped a rope under the door, we tip over a cabinet with advertising leaflets. Now the door to the room with a sofa is held bythe fallen cabinet. It is extremely doubtful that someone will suddenly begin to push it away, there is nothing useful in this office! All the previous rooms didn't have anything, did they? So there's nothing to look for, moving fallen furniture. In any case, we will hear it. And we will react accordingly, they will get it hard!

The trophy machine gun was placed on the table, the corridor was now covered fully. The belt was repaired by removing the damaged magazine. Now the formidable weapon was quite capable of showing someone some serious pain. There was vodka, canned beer, and two bottles of cognac in the bar. And in the locker by the sofa there were light snacks, a few cans of fish, some dried bread and two boxes of chocolates. Hmm, fishto eat with cognac, and candy to polish it off with, perfect! Oleg drank vodka, almost a whole bottle by himself! Whatever, he needs it. We didn't even have time to distribute shifts, sleep felled us immediately.

Strange as it may seem, the night went by quite calmly, nobody outside the window even yelled. No shots either. I woke up first. The technician was still sleeping, wrapped his hands around a couch pillow. Wow, how he really twisted himself, I didn't think a man could do that! I'm trying to get up, but my body immediately responds with pain. Yes, my ribs are definitely broken, maybe more than one. What can I come up with? Bandages again? What's the point? I won't be able to do it any better, let it stay how it is now... There are still fish left, and some cognac... hmm... at the very bottom? Who drank so much, was it really me? Well, why just look at it? Warmth spreads, even the pain seems to go away. I followthe morning ration of cognac with candy.

Wait a minute! What day is today? And what time is it now? What do I

need the day for? It's 9:40, and I have an idea! I manage to move the overturned cabinet on the second attempt. Oleg never wakes up. I have a couple of minutes... I waddle into the next room, there's a big window there.

“Tramp, come in!”

Silence, only some rustling over the speaker. Doesn't the walkie-talkie reach from here? It can't be struggling to reach, there's almost no distance. Yeah, it would reach, if there is someone who can answer. It may well be that Gavrish is already lying in a ditch with his head shot through, and the walkie-talkie is lying somewhere in a hidden corner.

“Tramp, come in!”

“This is Tramp! I'm here!”

Gavrish's voice, I recognize it.

“Answer to Predator. How's the situation?”

“Fucking great! It's all in order.”

“Do you know the car parts shop?”

The ataman is silent for some time, apparently, thinking.

“Is it on Lesnaya, or what?”

“Exactly. Send ten people there, someone needs help. Do you have Valya? Let him come too.”

“Sure! How soon?”

“Like at 1 pm. Will they make it?”

“Definitely!”

“Anything happens, give me a call. A person will be available.”

“Got it!”

So… If the guys of the ataman get here, there is a chance to cover the remaining distance relatively intact. But we will have to check everything, and more than once. I manage to wake up the technician, but not right away. Yesterday we got thoroughly drunk. So he took some time figuring out what was happening.I had to feed him a can of fish and half a box of candy. And then he got completely loopy. Only after a good sip of vodka did he wake up!

I explain to him the task. And again. Got it, thank god… We drag the machine gun to the corner room, moving the table to the window. The shop is visible like it’s on the palm of our hand! This terrifying machine is quite capable of sweeping the whole site in front it if someone makes a noise! Twelve o’clock, we have finished our preparations. At the same time, we also finish the rest of the snacks. I don't know who the local boss was buying his supplies for, but it was not capable of satiating our appetites! But I shove a bottle of cognac into my backpack. Who the fuck cares it’s heavy! If everything works out, we don't have to carry it.

Chapter 21

The bandits show up fifteen minutes before the agreed time. At least they didn't come in like a herd, that's good! No, they came carefully, looking around. They didn't run out into the open place, and they moved quietly. No one yelled or even smoked! They inspected the space in front of the store, and someone climbed in. Then they spread out around the point, taking shelter nearby. So far everything seemed to look ok. And I don't see anyone who shouldn't be here around. But who would that be? We're all local now...

"Look," Itell the technician, "if anything goes wrong, shoot!"

He looks over the machine gun in doubt. The formidable machine evokes his respect.

"But... I won't hit!"

"Use the fountains of dust to orient yourself, you'll see where you hit."

I tie two belts together, the one that was in the machine gun in the first place, and a spare one, extracted from the machine gunner's backpack. Almost two hundred shots! You can make a mess with that. Well, it seems like that's all...

I look at Gavrish's guys in position again. Waiting...

"Okay." I clap on Oleg's shoulder. "Look out!"

Having walked fifty meters I realize that I am not carrying any cargo anywhere. My whole body is literally outraged by every movement. My ribs, arms, and legs hurt. Every breath is hard to take. All sorts of stuff is going through my head. I was noticed when I was a hundred meters away from the open space, the barrels of a couple of assault rifles turn in my direction. I walk another forty meters and sit on a bench. There's some

bullshit, like a flowerbed, next to it. The bench has a concrete base that rises 30 centimeters above ground. This is the place I chose as shelter. In front of it there is some relatively flat ground, twenty to twenty-five meters of space. And the machine gun covers it well, there will be no place to hide for advancing foes. And I will be able to hide behind the pedestal and then try to crawl away. Though I can hardly walk, how would I crawl?

I wave my hand, inviting someone to come to me. After some time, a figure separates from the new arrivals and walks in my direction. And who is it? Valya! So, well, at least this is clear, these are the ataman's guys. Okay, let's see what happens next. The bandit comes closer and smiles.

"You?!"

"Don't I look like me?"

"Well, seems like you've been…"

"Yeah, a little bit. Yesterday we had a fight with the Bears. Seriously fucked us up, yeah... "
He comes closer, sits down. He is still dressed dashingly. A vest, American trophy assault rifle, all that jazz...

"How's it going with you guys? Have Foma's guys left?"

"Well, they took off from Makar's base yesterday. They are still sitting at our place, talking. But they were going to leave, I saw them collecting things."

"Why?"

"Well, Foma…"

"I know. And I'm surprised they haven't left before."

"How did you know?!" The person I am talking to is sincerely surprised.

I tap the radio on my chest.

“Yesterday Iwas informed. It was a meat grinder, they say. It's a pity I didn't participate!”

Valya looks at me with respect.

“Well, you got some yourself…”

“That's why I called you! There’s a man with me. Vital. He was being followed by the Bears... We need to hide him temporarily, so that no one knows where he is. Got that?”

“We’ll solve thisissue! Gavrish…”

“I haven't told him yet. You know, it's not the kind of thing you say on the radio, that’s as good as shouting it from the roof into a bullhorn for the whole district to hear. So, you will tell him. You know us, we won't stay in debt.”

“Got it!”

“Then we’ll do this. Give me three people, they will come with me. We’ll need to pick up some loot. And then we all walk together to Khokhol. There we split up. I go to him, and you hide this man. But in such a way that nobody knows about him except you! You remember where we met up with the boss?”

“The place where there’s a line of chalk on the wall? Sure!”

“Put a note in the mailbox of apartment number two. It’ll say where you left him and all that stuff. Give him food, the poor guy’s starved. Apparently, the Bears didn’t spoil him…”

It was relatively easy from here on out. The guys of the ataman came up, and I went into our lair with them. I have to hand it to Oleg, he figured out

how to behave. We were met by a cold pupil of a machine gun barrel. Wearing a bloody bulletproof vest, he looked pretty formidable and impressive.

He impressed everyone!

Even me.

We collect things, cleaning up everything that can be taken away. With a clear conscience, I offload my cargo to one of my escorts. When I get to the main group, I nod at Valya.
“As soon as we get to the place, the machine gun is yours!”

The bandits were obviously excited,this agreement works for everyone. Oleg himself drags the heavy iron for now, throwing the machine gun belt on his shoulder. The imagelooks very severe.

* * *

How we got there... I don't remember. All I remember are fragments. At some point I stop and take a good sip of cognac. I can't say that I felt much better, but at least the pain subsided a little. At the checkpoint I was bandaged up. Among the bandits on duty there was someone who was familiar with this stuff. However before he started he spent a few minutes swearing about the person who had hurt me so much and the person who bandaged me up afterwards. Gave me a pill and the pain subsided for a while.

“You need to lie down! For five days, no less!”

Oh, shit, I was glad! You'd think I was planning to go dancing...

* * *

How I got home I don't remember either. I only came to my senses the next

morning, when I was thirsty. The pills had long stopped working, and the pain was shooting under my rib. Somehow I get up and stumble towards the closet, I have a supply of all sorts of medications there. First I grab the military stuff, I'm sure there are medicines for any situation! Morphine... well, I'll skip it... for now. I remember the machine gunner running around the yard after that stuff. With a leg shot through... Fuck that shit! I'll live without anything as terrible. Ketanol-duo. I remember that stuff from the past, a powerful thing! For me it had an almost universal effect, treated even a runny nose! So, let's start with it for now.

I spent the next three days lying down. I ate and slept. And I was coming to a little bit sometimes. I could bandage myself well enough. The pain was slowly receding too, I even slept well, without yellingfrom the slightest attempt to turn onto my side. It's good I remembered that walkie-talkie.

Mityai disappeared, by the way. And he didn't come to the trader on time. There are no more witnesses to my adventures, there's no one to ask.

* * *

"How did you find out?" Gavrish's forehead wrinkled.

"One of the guys told me... They received a message... No, I don't remember now! And then your guys also confirmed it. And how it got to them, you probably know better!"

The meeting of two old acquaintances did not look as spectacular as in the past times. Kaban appeared completely unnoticed, and Gavrish learned about it only when the leading posts reported the guests' visit. No preliminary agreements, no discussion of the location, nothing. Foma's assistant came straight to the camp. But there was no reason to refuse, and the ataman ordered to escort the guests to him, then came out to meet them. And then he was surprised again. The old bandit was accompanied by only three guards! It was nothing like the previous meetings, back then there were almost five times more. Gavrish, not showing his surprise, welcomed the guests and offered them a snack.

“Later…” Kaban shook his head.

They went upstairs, the ataman’s apartment was on the second floor, and there the guest asked:

"Who told him about Foma’s death? Don't you want to talk?” The guest squinted.

“What are you talking about?” The "hospitable" host was "sincerely" surprised. “So that the whole society would come at me later?”

“Where is that society now…” The old bandit waved his hand, sinking into the chair. “Everyone is acting like wolves towards each other…”

The ataman had already heard something like that.

After the terrible death of the ringleader, the seemingly monolithic gang suddenly started quarrelling. Some leaders didn’t want to recognize the unconditional power of Kaban and declared their independence. The territory previously controlled by the Depot people sharply reduced in size. And the ability of the new leader to check those that were out of order by force had also suddenly diminished. Makes sense: less territory means fewer people. And then... Kaban is not Foma! The old thief possessed not only authority, but also considerable opportunities. He knew a lot and didn’t share his secrets with anyone. And this also played a role. Couldn't not play a role!

“Okay,” nodded the ataman, “then what other questions do you have?”

He tried to be polite to the unexpected guest. Still, the forces of the Depo people, even after everything that happened, were still superior.

“I want to know.” Kaban clenched his lips. “Apparently, there’s a rat among us. And don't you smile! It's not clear that everything around you is fine!”

Against his expectation, the owner of the room did not argue.

“Yes," he nodded. “I think there’s more than one. And what do you suggest? No response? I'll tell you!”

The old bandit looked at his interlocutor with surprise. He didn't expect such honesty!

“I’ve known I have a rat for a while now. Tell me, how did the messenger from the Predator get into here twice? You've seen everything yourself, we have good security! I have a smart man for that! By the way, he was here under Kiryukha too…”

“So what's your point?”

“He's not going against me, I'd have been lying in a ditch with a hole in my head for long ago if he was! He sends informationregularly, sure... But he doesn't get in the way and doesn't do anything against me. So fuck it! Do you think you were skipped over? Fuck no… You're more interesting, since you’re bigger!

“And you won't be looking for him…”

“Honestly? I want to live, you know! I don’t have security like Foma! And in any case, what good was his security do him?” The young interlocutor answered sharply.

He jumped up, walked around the room, calmed down, took his place.

“He doesn’t bother me. And he’s asked for almost nothing. Just small stuff…”

“Yup,” Kaban nodded, “and gives great gifts, too! Just look at Makar’s spot! Don't you think that someday you will have to pay for it? Not to me. To him, to the Predator!”
“I thought about that," Gavrish agreed. “So what? Do you have a specific thought?”

“No," the guest sighed. “Not yet. But I do have a question.”

“Go ahead!”

“This... what's his name... Vortex. Where is he now?”

“Around here somewhere. He has a place in this area. He must have been laying low, he got hurt pretty bad.”

Kaban raised his eyebrow with interest.

“And when was that?”

“When Foma was killed, the next day. He and the Bearsgot into a serious scrap, rightnear here.”

“The next day?”

Gavrish smirked.

“You don’tthink it’s him, do you? That’swrong, I was at the scene of that fight myself. I touched the dead people myself. He was so hurt there, he barely dragged his legs! I think if not for the second dude, he would have stayed there.”

“And who is the second dude?”

Ataman clicked his tongue in admiration.

“There was a cool dude! The bulletproof vest was ripped to shreds, there should be bruises everywhere! But he didn't dropthe machine gun! Shotgun, backpack, an ox, not a man! The man is gloomy, his face is overgrown, he just stares at me from under his forehead! I wish hewould say something! No.. it's not Denis... he's a little weak.”

The ataman tactfully kept silent about the fact that upon leaving the machine gun at the checkpoint, this man disappeared without a trace. Not all information should be reported to your interrogator, no matter who he is!

“And where did he go?”

“Where does Vortex disappear to? The same place, I suppose…”

“Did you try to track him down?”

“We did. One guy was killed. I had to lie to everyone that he accidentally made a mistake somewhere, put his foot in the wrong place, so…” The ataman just shrugged. “You know, I'm not in a hurry to die yet…”

Kaban is silent. He reached out, took a bottle from the table and poured himself some vodka. The ataman did the same thing. They both drank their glasses and followed it with some snacks.

“How are you going to lead?” Gavrish asked.

“I’m thinking... Foma was pulling so much…”

“If there's anything, call, we’ll help.”

“Done.”

The main thing was said, and the leaders agreed. No war. Requirements of the deceased Foma were not brought up by silent agreement. That page of relations is turned over.

“Tell you what... You find me this Denis. I want to talk.”

“In the evening I will try to send a message. When he answers, I will arrange a meeting,” said the ataman. “He usually hangs around here somewhere. But sometimes he disappears for a while. Will you wait?”

“Well, I still got a couple of days.”

Chapter 22

Today I finally crawled out. That's exactly what I did, crawled out, it's hard to call that walking out. The bruises on my face were more or less gone, and even the pain in my ribs was a little bit better. But there is a silver lining, I spent this time at the computer, trying to understand the huge amount of information. And I was more than satisfied with the result! Now I must look for Oleg, I will need him!

I take getting dressed seriously. Armor plates inserted into the vest, ammunition replenished, weapons cleaned. I have to look the part, no matter how I feel! Having left, I carefully check my traps. I've used the lessons from Korney to the max. By the way, one tripwire had been set off! God knows who got blown to pieces, but there's quite a bit of blood at the site of the explosion. I didn't overthink it: a piece of pipe, two hundred grams of TNT, a simple fuse, and you have a mine! Anyone close enough will get hit quite hard! The main issue in not some tricky device, but the detonation method. Korney knows this well! I learned something about it too.

I see the result with my own eyes. Somebody got it pretty hard. His comrades were smart enough not to go any further. And that's a good call, there's something else if you go further. By the way, I have to remember to stick a new mine here, but this time using another detonation method. I make a mental note and continue walking, bypassing my own surprises. There's not enough of them here. That's okay, the USEC package must have arrived at Khokhol's, there's bound to be some useful stuff in it. This is where it will be used. There's no need for anyone to go here at all! I don't have any friends nearby, and I don't feel sorry for my enemies.

Close by... I probably have no friends in the whole city! The ones I had were dead at the beginning of the mess, and there were no new ones. There are some accomplices! But they would sell me down the river at the first opportunity. The note from Valka was in the agreed place. Well done, boy! Realized who he should be friends with! I will have to reward him!

I go to the address, hiding from habit from any sounds and avoiding open places. Such habits appear rather quickly... And where is the peaceful systems administrator now? He's back there, in the past. And the person I've become doesn't look like him anymore. Now the gun has become more familiar to me than the keyboard. Predator, or not a predator, but I'm definitely some evil wild animal by now. That's the right house. I lie in the bushes for about half an hour, look closely and listen. But I don't observe any signs of an ambush. Okay, let's try.

I won't risk it, I've had enough of risks. Slowly, without rushing, checking everything, that's the only way! It wouldn't be shameful to give up, I only have one life after all! I slowly go up to the third floor, here it is, the right door. But I pass it, I have to carefully examine the upstairs. You know, there could be all kinds of tricks... The fourth and fifth floors were deserted. Three apartments were standing with open doors, but the others were not breached yet. The metal doors must have been a hinderance. Well, I've already thought of something for that!

I take out a metal piece. The metal serrated plate is bent at an angle of ten degrees. I carefully shove this thing under the bottom edge of the door. There are gaps here, the thing gets through, though not without difficulty. Now for the next part. One of the plates has a common nut soldered to it. I screw a typical bolt into it. Screwing in, it slowly moves the two parts of the thing to the sides. The notches bite into the floor and the edge of the door.

As a result, the door jams securely. You could still knock it out from the inside! But it can't open quietly anymore! It will be hard to knock it out too. In any case, I will have time to prepare. Having spent half an hour jamming the doors, I return to the third floor. Now I can visit the apartment I need.

The door, as I expected, was locked. Well, I press down on the right side of the door and knock carefully on the door. One. Pause. One, three, one. Why on the right, by the way? Stepanych recommended that.

“What is your task? Are you a cop or what? What, somebody ordered for this particular figure to be taken alive? Do you need him like that? I mean, at the cost of your own head?”

“No. But this is more convenient!”

“More convenient for what? To see who opened the door, yes?”

“Yeah. And what's behind the door, too.” I didn't understand the indignation of the instructor yet.

“Mm-hmm. Like you’re the smartest… And behind the door, we have to assume, are full-on morons? They don’t understand simple things too?”

Shit!

That's right!

“So they'll also look in this direction first, won't they?”

“Finally!” The shooter grins. “Of course, where else! And if the person is clever, he will shoot there as well. Maybe it's purely preventive, put a dozen bullets there right away. Or a grenade will roll up… Different things happen!”

He's frankly telling me off! But for a good reason.

“Stand to the other side. The person behind the door instinctively expects danger from the entrance. He is not afraid of whoever is on the other side of the door, he does not feel any danger from them. I don't see him, so I'm not afraid! Fucking pattern thinking. How many people have already been buried because of this!”

I imagine myself in the place of such an apartment dweller. Someone knocks or rings, I go to open it. I take aim at the door…

“So I can shoot through the door?”

“Well, it's not a bank! We don't have safe doors in our apartments yet, or at least they’re rare. So even a pistol will shoot through a normal front door without much difficulty. And overall... there are all sorts of options.”

And that's why, when I hear movement behind the door, I send an ordinary rounded piece of wood towards the stairs. I couldn't find a round one, so I had to make one with a knife quickly. It rolls down the stairs and taps quietly. It doesn't ring, like, for example, a tin can, but taps softly. An incomprehensible sound. It sounds like something is being dragged down the stairs.

What might the person behind the door think? Special knock. So, it seems that a friend has come to the door. But he did not wait and went down the stairs. Curiosity, as you know, killed the cat. This truth is old, but not everyone remembers it.

Almost silently, the lock opens (well, there is still a technician in the apartment!), and from behind a door a head pops out. The hair is dark, dirty—Oleg! He looks at the stairwell, holding a shotgun at ready. Not gonna look back, huh?

“Don't shoot if you’re scared!” I whisper almost in his ear. Just in case, I stretch my hand forward to block the gun.

He softens at once.

“You?”

“No, the Spanish ambassador! Well, who else were you expecting here? You alone?”

“Yes. He promised to come in the evening, bring food.”

“Come on, we'll get inside. Shouldn’t stay out on the stairs for long!”

It was relatively clean inside, even the doors of the many cabinets were closed, and nothing was lying around. Right in front of the door there was a sofa with old tires on it, a kind of barricade in case of invasion by strangers. I had to squeeze past it sideways. Oleg lived in a back room with access to the balcony. On the narrow sofa there was a neatly folded blanket, and on the floor there were several plastic bottles of water.

“How you doing here?” I sit in a chair to the left of the door.

“Well... I’m quietly living.”

“How is it with the food?”

“Not a restaurant…” He doesn’t say much, apparently his past talkativeness was caused by stress. His fear must have passed now, but the technician keeps the shotgun within reach at all times.

“Well, I'll solve that problem for you. Yes, and it's time to change locations.”

He livens up a little.

“That's right, it's time! But where do we go?”

“I will have a serious conversation with you about that!”

I have the flash drive on the chain in my hands.

“Have you ever seen one of these before?”

The technician raises his hand, takes the flash drive and carefully examines it.

“I have seen it more than once. These were usually held by group leaders. They wear them along with tokens, also on a chain. But it's tricked-out, with some fingerprint scanner…”

He thinks for a while, then nods vigorously.

“Yes! I've seen the same thing too, in passing. There was just no way to look at it in detail. Happened only once.”

Oleg looks at me questioningly. He doesn't quite understand my question. We should be thinking about how to live an extra day, and I'm asking stupid questions.

“Here's the thing... I have information that this thing disables the machine gun turrets. Not all of them, only specific ones. And it works in conjunction with your card. But how do we know which flash drive pairs with which card?”

And that's when his eyes light up in excitement!

* * *

After looking in my basement, I bring him one of the many laptops, with a fully charged battery and a replaceable external power supply. He has enough battery for about four hours. On the laptop is some information that may theoretically be relevant to the issue we’re studying. At the same time, I throw some more food into my backpack, who knows when Valek will come here... I would have taken more, but I'm not much of a porter now.

The technician is clearly looking forward to my appearances, now he's doing his usual thing, and there's some goal in life again! It’s simpler, familiar work, that allows you to forget about what's happening around you for a bit. And he really needs it! We spend some time in a very professional discussion, and the technician seems very clever! Okay, it's getting darker, and it's time to go. Otherwise I have a good chance of burying myself in my own surprises. But Oleg obviously does not want to let me go! For once he has found a normal person to talk to, and he hurries to pour his soul out to me. At last, I interrupt him in the middle of a sentence and expressively nod in the direction of the closed window, saying that soon it will become

completely dark, and I still have to walk a while!

I was right, I reached my basement when it was completely dark. For quite obvious reasons I don't risk lighting a flashlight, so I crawl at a slow speed, almost sniffing every meter of road. Damn. Without undressing, tossing aside my weapon and backpack, I fall on the bed. Bandage, a dose of medicine, and sleep! I don't even want to eat.

* * *

In the morning Gavrish got in touch. He hinted that a recent acquaintance wanted to talk to me. Who is this guy?

"Well... you gave him quite a gift."

Aha! Kaban, then? He showed up!

"He wants to talk to you."

"Like last time? Not interested. There will be no more talk in such an environment. You can tell him. He is not a fool himself, he will understand."

Pause.

"Well... just you and him, I promise!"
"Do you swear?"

"Cross my heart!"

"I'm not a cardiologist, I don't give a fuck about your heart. Okay, I'll let the boss know. I'll be waiting on the same wavelength in an hour. Over!"

So Kaban asked for a meeting... Is that good or bad? Judging by the fact that he agrees to a one-on-one conversation, there will be no obvious charge for Foma's death. But why does he need this conversation? All

uninvited guests left Gavrish's location, Valek spilled that to the technician. So the deputy of the deceased gangster leader is not planning to fight yet. Which is not guaranteed! If he is firmly convinced of my guilt, he doesn't need any war. They'll shoot from afar... Fuck, they might hire the same Gruzny! He doesn't care who he kills. Might get Mityai too, but most likely he wouldn't make contact with Kaban. But hiring someone to do that is simple as shit! Just pay... The hour passed quickly, I didn't even have time to evaluate all the options. Looking at the clock, I turn on the walkie-talkie.

"Tramp, come in!"

The ataman responds immediately.

"Tell the guest to stomp to Khokhol's. Let's talk about it there."

"Okay, I'll tell him."

"I will be there by two o'clock."

"Good."

"Over!"

On the way I drop by Oleg's, bringing him another charged external power supply unit. I have plenty of them, there was a whole room full of shit like this in Makar's warehouses. Brand new, in the package, take it and use it! So I took them. I built a simple controller for charging and put all these things in one of the rooms of my lair. The technician met me joyfully! Judging by the food packages, he didn't even stop to eat. I try to figure out the main point from his confusing speech, it's hard to do.

"Look!" He sticks a notebook with scribbled notes under my nose. "Oh, the battery died at the wrong time!"

I try to figure out his notes, but then I remember the extra power supply, which I take out from my backpack. Oleg immediately snatches it from me

and runs to the laptop.

“Here!” He points his finger at the screen. “Look!”

His idea was quite simple. Taking the number on the card as a starting point, he assumed that all devices somehow related to each other should have a single code identifier. There were records on the disk made by Misha Dronov. There was also a hacked key file. Oleg simply copied the first part of his card number and tried to find a similar record in the file.

“Line fourteen! See?”

And that's right, the numbers match.

“But we need to dig to figure out what's next.”
I nod to the power supply, to say, basically, who’s stopping you?

“I will try to solve this problem for you... Just remember to bring food! Don't forget!”

Walking down the street to the trader, I mentally admire the technician. What a head! And all he had to do was to compare the card and the flash key! Although before the visit to Foma I didn’t have these access cards, hadn’t even heard anything about them! I could have searched until I was dead. And here’s a familiar door, Sledgehammer is smiling at me.

“I see you got some knocks! Have you ever tried living without bruises?”

“Hasn’t happened for me yet.”

I don't have to give up my guns, but I still put the ZIG next to the guard. I don’t need to be so obviously disrespectful, my pistol is enough. By the way, in the box I notice a TT and a small revolver. There are no visitors except for Kaban sitting at the table. That's interesting! Did Pavel disarm him? And didn’t disarm me... I doubt very much that he did it on his own initiative! Khokhol wouldn't fail to point out to him that he was being

tactless. Yet Foma's deputy is a very serious man by local standards! Wow! How should I interpret this? The bandit clearly noticed the pistol on my thigh and surely drew conclusions. I say hello to the trader and nod at Kaban politely to say hello, because we haven't seen each other for a while.

“I will leave you for a bit, okay?” Ogryzko rises from the chair. “Work, you know…”

Smart dude! He basically turns his shop into a kind of neutral territory. A place where even the most irreconcilable opponents can talk without fear. Strong move!

“Have you been beaten up?” Kaban asks nonchalantly.

“Yes... got into a fight with some Bears," I reluctantly answer. “They followed us for two days. We were hiding out for a day, thinking they would pass us. They did not…”

That's right, no need to lie. Gavrish certainly looked at the place of the battle. They must have seen where we rested. Leftover food, empty cans. It is clear that people didn't just spend half an hour there. But the stereotype of human perception takes care of the rest! There was a fight with the Bears. And the corpses are surely still there. Deformed weapons, shot cartridges, all of it! Our rest location is there too. So, the story that we spent two days trying to get away is seen as quite reliable. And I wasn't near Foma's house, look for other suspects! It seems that Kaban has already understood this, but he still doesn't stop his attempts to get to the truth.

“Remember?”

I see a bullet I know well in front of me.

“Naturally, I gave it to you myself.”

“And these?”

He pours a handful of crumpled bullets out on the table with the same rare color.

“Well, I didn't leave these bullets for you. However, I can't say anything about anyone else. I’m not the only one who uses such ammo.”

“And who else?”

“Actually, USECs have such cartridges. Not everyone! Just some, let's call them very special people. And these people work exclusively with silent weapons. Didn't know that?”

This is news for him! The bandit’s face changes. It seems that he had come to the conclusion that Foma was killed by Predator’s order. And then, all of a sudden, there’s this!

“You don't believe me?” I turn towards the trader and make a sign for him to come to us. Ogryzko raises his eyebrow questioningly.

“What is it?”

“Can you tell us who sells these bullets?” I show him the ammunition laying on the table.

“It's rare... And it doesn't appear often. You gotta get with the foreigners. Sometimes such cartridges can be found. But not often! And they cost quite a bit. Not everyone else will be able to buy them.”

“Thank you!” I answer sincerely.

Khokhol nods and returns to his place.

“Hmm…” Kaban rubs his chin, confused. “Well, where did you get them?”

“Look, I don't do supplies. What they give me is what I work with. Is there anything else?”

The bandit squints.

“There is. In short, I suggest neutrality for now. Your clan doesn't climb up our ass, and we don't touch you. Deal?”

“Well, I'm not the boss here. I'll report it. And there it’ll be as the boss decides. Personally, I don't need any fucking war. There are other things to do. That’s it?”

Kaban is hesitant.

“No, I have a specific proposal, but not for your boss. Personally, for you.”

I tilt my head, listening.

“I have a client... quite uncomfortable. And really nasty. Of course, I can pressure him myself, but it's not a good time now. And I don't want to bother your boss, it’s not that scale of problem.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Tame him. But not so he’s dead, just in such a way that he asks for help. He has nowhere to run for support, he is not friends with his neighbors. So there will be only one way.”

“To come to you?”

“You seem to catch my drift! So, are you gonna take it?”

“Give me the lay of the land, let's see. Maybe he's in some pit, and I'm not a miner!”

“You're savvy!” Kaban grins. “Okay, a man will come from me and bring a gift. You look at it closely, open it... Everything will be there.”

The bandit gets up from his chair.

“Khokhol!”

The salesman approaches us slowly.

“I wanted to say thank you.” The bandit tilts his head. “For the shelter, for the kindness... You’ve set up well here, haven’t you?”

“I'm not complaining," he replies with a degree of satisfaction.

“So I see, you have friends everywhere! New ones. And it is not good to forget the old ones!”

Ogryzko gets worried.

“What’s up, Kaban?”

“Well... You have a lot of temptations here. You can sell more than food and junk, right?”

“Well…” Ogryzko doesn’t understand.

“Well... It’s possible that temptation sometimes appears. Say something about some old friends, for a small sum of money. Or a lot. There’s always someone who wants to know more than everyone else, am I right? Greed can lead not just to poverty. Sometimes it can lead to the grave. Think about that... You've heard of such a thing as a rocket launcher, haven't you?”

Khokhol nods.

“Did you know that a door or even two don’t stop them? I can guarantee you that with my full authority!”

The bandit approaches the door, takes his weapon out of the box and hides

it in his pockets without loading it.

“I won't break your rules, it’s not a good example for everyone else. Only remember that your rules, they are inside. Mine are everywhere! Have you heard the saying about the cat's curiosity? Remember…”

The door slams behind him.

Wow, what a man! Good dude! I give him an A in my mind. I don't know what kind of thoughts he went to this meeting with, and how he expected to bend me over, but he changed tracks right in the middle of the conversation. And no matter fucking what, he got some benefit for himself. And how cleverly did he scare Khokhol? At the same time, he made a transparent hint to me. Not that I particularly love the salesman, but I need him. So I need to support him somehow...

Ogryzko sighs and nods at my desk.

“A hundred grams?”

A hundred grams, of course, was just the start… But I calmed him down as much as I could.

“I don't know how tough and strong Foma was, I didn't talk with him. But he’s dead now too! And Kaban... He’s a clever man, I admit. But right now he can't put things in order in his own house! So he has to ask others to do it!”

I tactfully stop all further conversation on this subject. I told him everything, the rest you can think about by yourself!

I also ask about solar charging. I doubt that there is an inverter like the one I have here. And, as it turned out, I was right.

“No, I don't have one. An ordinary charger to recharge flashlights and computers, we got a couple. But something more serious... No, but I can

look for something!”

“Don’t!” I wave my hand. “Give me those, I need to charge flashlights!”

Why give the man more to think about? What does he care what kind of computer I’m going to use and why? The flashlight explanation is simple and understandable. No further questions arise.

* * *

I dragged the goods I got to Oleg’s and installed the thing in a couple of hours, I pass out there. It is too late to go home and I feel the cognac I drank. I wake up in the morning and look around for a while—where am I? Only when I see the head of the technician leaning over the laptop do I relax. But I need to eat something!

“Did you have breakfast?”

“What?”

Got it... the man is in his creative process. I get it! I'd love to sit down next to him! Okay, I’ll work as a chef, there’s only one laptop here! I boil some water and get a couple German soups. Oleg swallows his, almost without tasting. I think that he would eat soup made of tires with the same amount of enthusiasm.

“Well, how's it going?”

Not that he achieved some kind of breakthrough. But the existence of a single admission system is now obvious. All warehouses and other objects of interest used to be part of this system before. Of course there were also levels of access, and any single user only saw his little piece. But the technician dug up some patterns.

“If we had a flash drive!” he exclaims. “We could enter my warehouse!”

“Have you already figured out the number you need to type in?”

“That’s easy! There are two problems. No, three! You need a flash drive—the flash key. The hardware and the software for encoding. And the master key to confirm the authority, because without it the process of recording will not be finalized. Then the security system wouldn’t read it.”

And what happens next doesn’t need to be said!

“And how do we know that the system has read and accepted the key?”

He does not know this yet...

I'm gonna have to rack my brain here, too. I sit at Mishka's computer and carefully check everything written there. It makes sense to reread the records found at Makar’s. It’s quite possible that I might have missed something, or simply not paid attention.

* * *

Day two. I go back and forth all the time. But not for a second do I stop looking carefully in all directions. Just in case... Stepanych also told me more than once that the biggest trouble is always waiting for you when you relax. So even now, I try to not follow the same route twice. You can't trust anyone here.

This is the result. I sit in front of a laptop. On the table in front of me is an empty flash drive inserted into the recording device. A key file has already been generated on the computer. All that remains is to press the button. But I slow down. I don't even know why. If Dronov made a mistake? I’m not competent enough to check whether his calculations are correct. Oleg even more so. He is a specialized technician. Yes, he’s not a bad analyst as it turns out. But he is not a master of cracking other people's programs.

All you have to do is click and then the program will do everything by itself. But this click will determine whether the machine gun turrets turn

on and kill us. And that's it, the end of the Predator. I am stalling... Our departure time is already decided, Oleg is ready. Backpacks are packed and weapons are checked. Now all I need to do is encode the key.

“Well?" my inner voice sarcastically asks me. “What’s the holdup? Do you have any doubts about your own work? Then go ahead, continue to sit in your basement! Crawl on your belly in the surrounding area and shoot idiots from ambushes. Sleep waiting for a grenade to come through the window. You're used to it, aren't you?”

A mouse click, and the LED on the key blinks.

"Operation complete. Save the file for the next recording?” A message pops up on the laptop screen.

“Save."

"Do you want to encode another key?”

“No.”

In my hand is a small metal and plastic object. It can save someone's life, or it can cut it short. I put it on a chain around my neck. Okay, it's time to go.

Chapter 23

“Here it is…" The technician looks around the corner.

A stocky one-story structure. It is skillfully built into the folds of the terrain, and on all sides it is surrounded by houses, sheds, and fences. You can see it only from two points, and only if you are close enough. I look at the concrete walls through binoculars.

"Pumping Station No. 18 of Tarkovsky Gorkomunkhoz," says the inscription on the sign near the turn towards the building.

I am inclined to believe the sign, the whole building looks very peaceful. The impression is only ruined by the remains of human bodies. I can see two people from my location. To be more precise, I don’t see the bodies per se, but what’s left of them. I suppose the ubiquitous dogs have played a part, there are a lot of them running through the streets.

By the way!
They weren’t shot by the machine gun!

Why not?

“It’s most likely," the technician says after scratching the back of the head, “that the sensors are adjusted like that. They are programmed to shoot when the target exceeds a certain mass. Many alarm systems have this setup, or they would react to every cat.”

An explanation. It makes sense.

“At what distance do the machine guns start working?”

“The guys managed to make it about ten meters.”

Okay, so the dead zone starts from about this distance. And where does the

zone end? Oleg points towards the roof of one of the houses, where a cable hangs. According to him, Foma's bandits tried to throw wires to pull it down and use it to get to the roof of the building. They threw it, pulled it down, and one of them tried to climb on it.

"The guns opened fire on him over there," the technician pointed. "He lost his grip and fell. They wanted to pick him up... well, everyone died right there."

Half a hundred meters from the wall. The bullets fly further, of course. Basically, if you dig a tunnel under ground, you can approach the walls fairly close. But who knows, they probably thought of that? I've heard of seismic sensors in the army before. And Korney also told me a lot of things on this subject.

Again, the nearest approaches to the building are also made of concrete, and who knows how thick it is? I don't have a jackhammer! And there is no compressor, as well as no fuel for it. I grab my binoculars again and look at the walls. Where are the embrasures? There are a lot of metal hatches and flaps, but under which of them are the machine guns?

Unfortunately Oleg can't help me here. He feels rather uncomfortable, all his previous fears have returned at once, the man is shaking.

"Where do I insert the card?"

"To the right of the entrance there is a box... in there is a reading device. You have to open the lid slightly and tap the card, then the door will slide open."

Okay, I can't expect any more help from him. He is ready to run away right now, wherever he can. I'm wearing the trophy bulletproof vest and I shove additional plates from my tactical vest into it. I hope that not every bullet will be able to penetrate this protection. However, running with this weight is extremely difficult.

Shit!

And where do I put the flash drive? There must be some port, the system doesn't use wireless signal to read the code, does it? Once again I look at the flash key. The slot for recording is covered with a plastic plug. It would make sense to assume that there is some kind of cable on the approaches to the building. The system must have foolproof protection in case of some failure and the key is read incorrectly. I strongly doubt that a machine gun burst serves as an error signal, I'm sure some other notification is provided.

"How does this barrier open?"

There is a small parking lot near the wall of the building, it is impossible to approach the entrance without passing it. Entry is obstructed by an automatic barrier.

"I don't know, we always got out of the van in the parking lot."

Let's assume that it is opened from the guard station, and then they have to know all the license plate numbers for all the cars that are allowed to enter. Does that make sense? Yes. But somebody could also come on foot, right? In the current Tarkov, no one's driving around in cars. Before the first ambush, sure…

No, not an option. But I can't exclude it completely either. As far as I remember, the USECs always tried to move by car, surely they thought about it here as well.

And if so… Here is the reader, exactly the same as a standard paid parking lot at some supermarket. So at this distance machine guns should not open fire yet. I strongly doubt that such a device is located somewhere out of sight of security cameras. Visual control has to be present, anyone could roll up to the gate. Well, I can sit here and think for a long time, what do I do?

"Wait for me here." I put away my binoculars. "If anything happens you walk back and make a deal with the ataman through Valya. Say you're a

technician and so on…”

Oleg's swallowing nervously, and he's obviously not well. Well, I can't help him now!

Step two. The heavy armor presses on my shoulders. Assault rifle... Well, that goes behind my back. There is no one to shoot at yet. No need to start a shootout with a soulless machine, right? I walk down the road, looking around. What am I planning to see? But my subconscious stubbornly clings to the small details. A plastic bottle. Empty, used to contain water. How long ago was I making a living filling these bottles? It fells quite recent, but at the same time it feels like an eternity has passed.

Stop.

The barrier.

I approach the reader.

So where is the cable? No cable.

There is a device for rolling a card. But I strongly doubt that the access card to the facility is the same as the card for the parking lot. Not every driver bringing in cargo should have the right to access a secure facility. Okay, the card doesn’t matter for now! Where do I stick the flash drive? I don't see any nests or connectors. I assume that they may be somewhere inside. But I strongly doubt that an ordinary PMC operator would be allowed to open the panel to connect something from the inside.

No, there must be something else. But what? I take out the flash drive, spin it in my hands. Whoa! What is this? An oval recess in the remote control. Without any markings but with a groove on one side. Why? For the chain! It would fit right in... I wipe the dust from the remote control, put in the flash drive. Nothing happens... Although... I also wipe the screen, now it says: "Access is allowed." That’s it?! Can I continue in?

Just in case, I squeeze the flash drive in my hand. This facility uses a wireless verification system, it's quite possible that something reads the flash drive key deeper in the facility. If I stow the key under the metal vest plates the signal might not get through! A shadow falls under my feet and I raise my head. A reinforced concrete wall rises above me, blocking the sun. The dead zone? Here's the gate, I open the lid and press the key card to the reader. A second... another one... Something clicks, squeaks, and the heavy door moves towards me. Another second, and it smoothly moves to the side. "Welcome!" Now I have to go back, Oleg doesn't have the flash drive.

"Well, show me your home…" I drop my vest right on the floor with pleasure.

It turns out to be quiet inside, and somewhat stale. The technician explains that when there's no people in the facility, all life support systems shut down after two hours. So it's better to wait a little, until the ventilation drives some air to the depths of the building. Overall, the issue of energy preservation is solved here. For example, lighting only works where we are located. As we pass them and move further in, the lights behind us go out slowly. Security room, here we picked up some food. Water flows from the faucet in the corner.

"There's a bathroom around the corner," the technician explains. "It works! And it even has a shower!"

We look in there and turn on the water heater in the tank. How long has it been since I've washed properly?

"Well, here is it…" Oleg points. "This door leads down."

Yes, I can see that myself, the ramp here has a noticeable slope. And here's the device for reading the keycard.

Just in case, I look around carefully to see if there are any flash drive key nests around here. But apparently, active defenses are only implemented on the approaches to the entrance, here there's no visible holes or cubbies

where the machine guns could hide. I take out the second keycard from the stash of the deceased Foma. No surprises, the door slides smoothly to the side. And here we stop! We dragged a metal wardrobe out of the security room and placed it across the aisle. Who the fuck knows how this whole contraption works... What if there is no reading device down there, and the door slams behind our backs, never to open again?

But there's a reader downstairs. Our fears were unfounded this time. We can examine the basement floor without being distracted by such questions. The whole construction turned out to be two floors. And here we were in for a serious bummer! This was an auto parts warehouse. Not huge, but carefully organized. It had almost everything, from spare fuses to rear bumpers. Everything needed to repair almost any of the jeeps in the USEC arsenal. If there was a will and some perseverance, it is probably possible to assemble a car from scratch, fill it up, and drive it out of the gate—there are also small reserves of fuel and lubricants.

It becomes clear why the local security left the warehouse. Most likely they were called in to help someone, where they all died. And since this warehouse had no immediate value, they did not bother to send a shift here, there were much more important issues.

Having walked around downstairs and looked through the numerous boxes and pallets, we see that the contents of this warehouse, undoubtedly of considerable value in peacetime, are now almost useless. For us, anyway. The only joy is a small workspace. A couple of machines, a rich choice of tools, soldering irons, and other similar goods. We could sell part of it easily, and there's plenty of stock for our own needs. Having finished with this floor, we go back upstairs, there are also rooms here. But here... For most of the rooms we didn't have the keys. As a matter of fact, a gas-cutting unit from downstairs could simply cut out the doors. But that was a scary idea. The decision came unexpectedly.

"Listen, there's automatics everywhere, right?" I ask Oleg. "Life support systems and fire suppression are your jurisdiction?"

“Yeah..." He tilts his head.

“They are controlled from a single control center, aren't they?”

“Naturally!”

“And you have access to it?”

The idea was as simple as a rock.

In most Terra Group life support management systems, priority was given to saving the lives of staff. Unless otherwise specified, this task was a priority.

Next.

There are no windows in the rooms, and the doors are almost airtight. All ventilation is centralized, no individual ventilation available. Remembering how the light sensors react to a person approaching, I logically assume that there is also feedback.

The light is on, that means there are living people here.

And surely this information goes to the computer that controls the security system, because that’s quite logical! It goes without saying that this computer also receives information from other sensors—fire detectors, leak detectors, and so on...

Switch off the ventilation in a specific locked room and then turn on the light.

Now the security computer receives the following information:
1. Ventilation does not work.
2. The light in the room is on, so there are people in there.

Without access to fresh air... yeah...

And since the life support system is not connected to the security system, which is fully consistent with the logic of Terra Group management, no instructions can be given to the life support computer from outside.

Mandatory separation of power, goddamit…

Just twenty minutes later, the screen of the life support computer showed a request for urgent repair of ventilation in a particular room—the automation sensed that something was wrong.

We're having tea, I brought some snacks with me. I knew it would happen like that!

After another five minutes the alarm blared anxiously, as if to say stop sleeping, a person has nothing to breathe!

Another cup and we move towards that room.

The lamps in the corridor start flashing, a visual signal.

Click, the door lock is unlocked—save the poor man, he has no air!

Thank you! We are already here!

By the end of the day there are no locked doors on the floor.

I can't say we found anything of particular value here. There was a relatively small stock of weapons and ammunition in the armory, which we broke into with an angle driver. Not too much, but not nothing too. In any case, I will find out where to use it.
We also found food, but not much, either. But for a while it will be enough, not necessary to gut my supplies yet. Standard western production army rations. Without anything special, but we're not spoiled for choice anyway.
But in one of the opened warehouse rooms there is something strange. From the outside this gimmick resembles... hmm... the top of a tank tower?

Maybe, but perhaps the tank was not too big or too heavy.

In short, a rounded metal dome. Oleg scratches the back of his head, puzzled, he doesn't recognize this thing. Thank God we find a description in the computer installed in this vault. It turns out to be so interesting that I drop everything and sit down to read it.

"...the product DZ-314 is designed to organize a temporary firing line and can be used against lightly infantry...
...the autonomy of the product, if all requirements are in compliance, can reach 36 days...
...the effective range of fire damage, provided the product is properly positioned, can reach three hundred yards...
...the use of this product against vehicles does not ensure the vehicle's timely stoppage and requires the installation of additional engineering barriers …"

As far as I can tell from the translation, it's like that machine gun turret, only a mobile version. It is armed with an M-249 machine gun and has two thousand rounds of ammunition. And the bottom part is supposed to be loaded with explosives, about twenty kilograms! The ammunition runs, a timer turns on. And after a specified time, or when someone tries to approach the installation, the signal is given to detonate. Fully autonomous, provided that the batteries are fully charged. During installation, you're supposed to set up a whole range of sensors, and the device uses them to aim. The top of the thing rotates 360 degrees. It can be remotely switched on and off with a special remote included in the set.

Shooting at it with assault rifles is not a good idea, unless you are lucky enough to damage the machine gun's barrel. But the armor here is very thorough, can't pierce it with a bullet. And the shape of this monster means that the ricochets will be hell!

The first thought is to drag her to the roof! And then anybody who tries to get in through there will stay there. Unless the bullets push their body off

the roof.

I share this idea with Oleg.

“Yes, no problem! There is a forklift truck downstairs, the batteries need to be recharged and that's it! The carriage rises upwards, reaches the roof.”

“Will we get this thing up there? Without explosives it weighs like a hundred kilos!

Right away I decide not to install twenty kilograms of TNT over my own head. The only thing we needed was the ceiling falling on us!

The technician only shrugs.

“The forklift can carry up to a ton. So I think a hundred kilograms to the roof will be easy.”

I go downstairs to charge the forklift batteries. Oleg worked on reactivating the unit. At the same time he tried to make it connect to the power network so that the problem of discharging batteries would not worry us too much.

By the way, about the network...
The electricity was apparently brought into the building by some kind of underground line. But just in case, there was also a reserve diesel generator with a large amount of fuel on the ground floor. Neither of us figured out where the exhaust pipe exited.

And the water in the tap is most likely not from the city water supply system, the taste was slightly different.

Overall a very interesting building!

It wasn't designed for long-term defense, but nevertheless you can sit in

here and fight back for quite some time. And even if someone broke through the doors, you can't just stroll down the corridor either—steel panels with embrasures are installed at key points. If you take up positions in time, it will be extremely uncomfortable for your enemies to try and get in here! The supply and exhaust ventilation system ensured that the air was even cleaned, if necessary.

A strange structure... I don't understand the purpose of it. It seems that it is temporarily adapted into a warehouse. Its true purpose is not clear to me yet.

I spent the rest of the day disassembling the equipment room. It was in the very corner, deep inside the building for some reason. When we opened the door we somehow didn't notice the narrow aisle between two cabinets, but there was a corridor and a room at the end. That's where we found the containers full of useful stuff that weren't unpacked yet. Who and why shoved them into such an uncomfortable place will remain unknown forever. But the things they contained were very interesting!

Knee and elbow protection, gloves that covered fingers and gloves that didn't, unusual helmets with muzzles and metal visors, flashlights... Even found a dozen spare plates for bulletproof vests! But the vests themselves, alas, were nowhere to be found. Apparently the outgoing security took all this good stuff with them. I was especially pleased with the box of spareradio batteries, these I really needed! A couple of medical sets like the ones that were lifted up from the factory tunnel. Valuable things! It was this medication that brought me back to life!

For sleep we choose the duty officers room, where we can keep an eye on monitors with video from the street cameras. Oleg assures me that by lunch tomorrow he will have finished reworking the automatic turret and we will be able to drag it to the roof.

With these thoughts we fall asleep...

For the first time I slept without any real worries. It is almost impossible to

get in here without being noticed, and we blocked the door. Very simply, by parking the forklift right next to it. We tied a cable on its massive counterweight bumper, fastened it to the door and released the handbrake. And since the floor was at an angle... I doubt strongly that among any potential guests there will be a man that's able to pull asmall handle and open the door that's weighed down by a good ton and a half... And the cargo gate servo drives were simply disconnected from power. So even if there is some way to start the motors from the outside, it will not help.

Time to get up!

Quick breakfast.

We inspect the area through our cameras—empty.

Remove the cable from the door. The liberated forklift moves towards the warehouse. At the wheel is Oleg, I am not experienced enough to drive this thing.

Everything turned out to be annoyingly simple.
The forklift hooks up to the pallet with the turret, turns around almost in place and moves quickly towards the gate. The power is already on, and the massive casements move forward and then spread out to the sides, opening the way out. The forklift truck goes back out to the street and, without moving away from the entrance, pushes its load upwards. A little more...

The fork leans forward. Wow, it can do that too?

Not on the first attempt, but the pallet makes it on the roof.

We do the same stuff in reverse—the forklift heads inside, the gate is closed, and we turn off the power.

We arm ourselves, mostly me. Oleg has plenty of his own stuff. The technician pushes the power cable through some hatch. That's a temporary solution, he promised to make a more professional setup later. We bring up

two manual winches and a rope, there's a lot of this stuff downstairs! And with the help of these tools we drag and drop the installation on the place we chose ahead of time.

Got it…

We pull it off the pallet with a winch, and now it's standing right on the roof.

And then the magic begins.

I run around the roof with the sensors, setting them up in different places. We install them, set them up, setting up the defensive position. The trick is also in the fact that from below you can't see any of this—a low barrier along the edge of the flat concrete roof prevents that. And even the top of the device, slightly rising above the edge of the roof, doesn't feel out of place. So, anybody who dares to jump over the barrier can expect an extremely unpleasant surprise!

Done!

Now Oleg runs along the edge, and the unloaded machine gun carefully monitors his movement. The servo hums quietly under the metal cover, moving the weapon back and forth.

Another sensor, now there are no dead zones. The machine gun rises above the roof surface by thirty centimeters, so that even an uninvited guest that's fallen to the ground will get it anyway — the weapon can point down. If someone crawls up close, like half a meter... but it's doubtful that anybody would be able to do it.

We drag a box of cartridges upstairs. Now the most important moment, loading the gun! I send the technician down, taking away the remote control.

All levers are in the off position.

Small buzzing of servo drives.

With an Allen screwdriver, I loosen the screws. One, another... The fourth is the final one!

The cover comes off!

Heavy armor plate bangs on the concrete.

Connecting the machine gun belts, I carefully lower them inside, laying them a certain way. There is a step-by-step instruction in pictures on the inside of the armored plate, you wouldn't make a mistake if you were drunk. It's a good thing that we didn't have to load the belts, they are delivered in boxes with cartridges, ready to fight.

Got it...

I'm putting the belt in the machine gun. The well-oiled barrel is no longer just a steel pipe, it's a weapon of death.

Pull the bolt, put the armor plate back on, tighten the screws!

I pick up the remote control and quickly go down.

The technician is right there, shifting from foot to foot at the door.

"Brought it?"

He nods his head and pulls out an ordinary pillow.

Toggle switches to the on position!

The LED blinks three times. Self-checking, says the display.

The remote control vibrates, the LED blinks again.

Check and calibrate sensors.

There are three LEDs, and they light up red.

Ready to use.

“Come on!”

The pillow rises above the edge of the roof, threatening to fall somewhere inside.

Dry clicks of shots!

The machine gun didn’t get the pillow, you can't see the feathers, but the bullets are hitting right at the place where it was just a moment ago.

If there was a man there, he wouldn't be there anymore!

That’s the kind of morbid humor that I’m capable of…

* * *

“Here.” Khokhol puts a narrow case in front of me. “A messenger came here from Kaban and said that the debt is repaid…”

The case is heavy, though not too big. The surprise he promised me?

But such gifts can also be deceiving, a literal surprise.

I nod at the trader and pick up the parcel.

“And this is for you!”

A walkie-talkie appears on the table.

“If you need me, get in touch on this channel. Someone is always on duty at the station, or they’re recording. So, within a few hours you will get an answer.”

Living between two homes is a bit difficult, and walking to the warehouse from here isn’t easy. I suppose my old residence will remain, so to speak, a backup. I'm not going to remove anything from of there, I'll make a reserve copy of the records on my computer if possible. And let it stay in a secluded corner! I'll leave my supplies there too, just in case. But food should be brought to the warehouse, this stuff is in short supply. And I gotta ask Gavrish for more, let him share!

* * *

Having made my way into my basement, I dump the cargo wherever, take the case and walk to the farthest part of the basement, which is located outside the office. I put the parcel on the floor and, taking out a flashlight, I carefully examine the gift. Korney told me a lot about stuff like that...

The outer surface of the case is intact, I can't find any holes through which to pull out a wire or a pin from the fuse. But that doesn't mean anything yet. Armed with a rechargeable dremel, a portable rotary tool, I gently drill a few holes on the side.

A milling machine, I expand the holes...

And now I file away.

After half an hour a hole appears on the side, big enough to stick a flashlight in.

Okay…

I don't see anything that shouldn’t be there yet.

Again the dremel, now on the opposite side.

No tricks?

Should I risk it?

I drill holes along the contour of the locks, I won't open them. Fuck knows what can happen. Push the lever, and something will turn on, who knows what may activate besides the mechanism of the lock.

The flashlight battery is dead!

Let it charge, but in the meantime, other things need to get done. Packing and parsing of the goods takes quite a long time, I also had time to make another flash key, now Oleg can safely leave the warehouse without risking getting shot. I won't take this equipment out of here for sure! No one, even if they get in here, will pay attention to these things, especially when they are lying on the floor in a pile of garbage. Who knows what kind of junk the former owners of this basement didn't have time to throw away?

So, the battery is charged, so let's go back to the interrupted activity. Having put aside the tool I consider the fruits of my actions. The locks now hold nothing, and the lid does not open only because there are two heavy cast iron pans on top of it. I brought them from the nearest kitchen.
Why?

What if there is a spring inside? If you unlock the lock, release the spring, and the lid jumps up.

So?

Who the fuck knows...

That's why a rope is tied to the handle of the lower frying pan, which leads out of the window, where I'll pull it from.

I get out, look around and listen—no one...

Pull!

Even on the street you can hear the frying pan falling to the floor. Is that it? It looks like it...

Now we pull on the second end of the rope that's attached directly to the cover...

Nothing either?

Let's have a smoke break... not literally, of course. Surprises can be of any sort. It makes sense to wait. Having illuminated the package with a flashlight I look at it through binoculars from a decent distance. It seems that all my precautions turned out to be...

Wait, not needless!

I have no reason to trust Kaban, and some paranoia was quite appropriate in this case! More precautions means I'll live longer!

There was an assault rifle in the case. Not quite normal, 9-mm caliber. I remember seeing something like that on the Internet, but I haven't held one of these in my hands. In addition to the actual weapons there were also three spare magazines with thirty cartridges each. The polyethylene bag was full of cartridges. At first glance around three hundred.

And that's it…

I doubt very much that Kaban suddenly wanted to give me a simple gift! But there were no notes in the case.

"...Okay, a dude will come from me and bring a gift. You should take a closer look at it, open it. Everything will be there."

That's what the late Foma's deputy said. And I strongly doubt that he

forgets his words.

Okay, I take the guns and ammo and look closely at the empty case again. No, there's definitely nothing else here. I rip off the foam lining, nothing underneath it either. Having taken a pot from the kitchen I pour the ammo into it — there are no notes in the pile of cartridges. I examine the cartridges themselves - none of them look like they've been opened before. And besides, what can even fit in there?

Magazines I also take apart. Nothing.

Shit! What kind of a puzzle is that?

I quite understand Kaban, a note found by someone with a request to scare some unreasonable subordinate may cost him his head. Quickly and without hesitation, he would be shot by his own people.

This only leaves the rifle.

The barrel is empty.

What if you take the silencer apart?

That's where it was...

"The group of 'racers' is based in the old car service station, Privokzalnaya 14. There's about fifty of them in total. But all the soldiers are skilled, many have served in the army, they can shoot. There are serious weapons, including a large-caliber machine gun on the tower of the old fire station. It would be quite enough if they were really scared and shit themselves…"

That's a good order!

This would need a whole company! I wonder how Kaban imagines scaring the shit out of fifty thugs with combat experience? These are not Makarov's gopniks, they wouldn't be scared by one or two snipers! They will attack

with a machine gun, no brick wall will help. And neither will most concrete walls. I know this area, it's mostly one-story houses, highly dubious shelter. It won't stop a heavy machine gun in any case. And I can't rely on Yurets. He helped once, that's enough for now! It's not good when someone knows something about me. I mean an outsider. I have not even told Oleg everything, and I'm not going to. And he really owes me his life!

And still…

* * *

I lower my binoculars.

Kaban did not lie! But he didn't tell the whole truth either.

The car service occupied the premises of an old fire station, that's where the fire towers are. A thick fence with a single door, several gates leading directly to the main building. And almost no windows. Behind the fire station, there are walls of some industrial facility, fifteen meters high. Former windows stood out with fresh bricks. Apparently, they were bricked up recently. Even suitable bricks were not found: any bricks they found, they laid. That's why these openings are so visible.

However, the bandits don't hide much, the path is well trampled directly to the gate, and someone is constantly walking there. A lookout is always is standing on the tower. Whether they're a mess on the inside or not, I don't know. But it doesn't affect the guard on lookout in any way, he doesn't leave his post. He's relieved every two hours.

And the view from there... and, accordingly, the shot... It is better not to stick your interested face out!

Yeah... Using a sniper rifle with my shooting "talents" is not an option. I'll shoot one of them... and what good would that do?

No.

There is also no option to mine: the approaches are open, mostly asphalt, and shelters where you can set up a mine are almost non-existent. And the gates leading inside are definitely barricaded with something from the inside. The explosion will cause very little trouble. Pounding the asphalt at night is not a very sensible idea!

Back in a warehouse, finishing my hot tea, I suddenly freeze...

A risk, of course, but if it works out!

Downstairs, among other things, there was a self-extractor, a winch. Just needs something to attach the loop of the cable to. And then you spin the handle! There was also a larger unit, but that needed to be mounted on a front bumper. And connected to the power supply. Wouldn't work…

But the self-pulling device was almost perfect for my purposes! I just had to add rope and slightly change the design. But it did not require any radical alteration. While Oleg works up top, bringing my wicked idea to life, I search the basement to choose a suitable block. I manage to carve something like a sled out of a metal sheet with a gas cutter, but with a single ski on the bottom.

I also visit the former car service center, dragging a few canisters of engine oil there in advance, we got enough of this stuff!

It took us two days to prepare and explore the area. We had to set up some unpleasant surprises for anyone on a night walk. That's okay, I'll clean it up later...

On the third night, I get to work.

Here's the fence of the car service center. Nobody is going to get inside, I feel okay here. But the heavy box of the sensor should be installed in such a way that it's not blown to shreds by a random bullet. Here's a concrete block! It is most likely part of the anti-ram fence—that was trendy a few

years ago. Back then all this stuff was installed all over the city. Even here. Although who would need a ram here?

But in this case it is a plus. The most convenient place for a microwave sensor!

Half a hundred meters to the side I place the second one. It's hidden at the foot of a lamp pole and reinforced concrete pipe, so no bullet can pierce it!

I hide the third behind a big boulder.

So...

I move back.

The second line of sensors aren't so close to the fence. There is no need...

Upon pulling back, I take the remote control and play with the settings. It's not for nothing that I translated the instructions all day! So, sensor number four needs to be moved, so it does not sense one of its neighbors.

That's okay, that can be done tomorrow...

The next night, the forklift leaves the gate. Around halfway to the destination, it unloads its cargo on the ground. That's it for today, the vehicle goes back. And I, having disguised the cargo with all kinds of garbage, go to rearrange and reconfigure the sensors. The idea, at first thought, seemed simple: install the machine gun device in front of the entrance to the car service center.

The question is how?!

Shall I bring it in the afternoon?

It will be a one-way trip.

I don't want to.

I think that Oleg will object as well.

Drag it in manually? I am not the son of Hercules...

* * *

The day starts... It's all been fun since the morning. Someone gets into a fight near our lair, and the shooting wakes us up. The shootout is pretty intense, we can clearly hear it through the walls of the warehouse. I zip up my jacket as I rush to the console. We were sleeping right there in the duty room, so it doesn't take long to get there. But there is no movement on the screens, yet the fight is nearby. Well, we're not going anywhere anyway, let them figure out their shit without us. By the way, sitting in the warehouse, Oleg managed to study the tech that's here. Everything turned out to be pretty simple and well thought-out.

"It's local software!" Oleg told me the "good" news. "From Zelenograd, I know it well! Initially, it is intended for something very different, it simply controls video cameras. And it has tricks! It can track changes in the speed of a person's movement, penetration into a forbidden territory, changes in the illumination... It can highlight and follow a subject, moving from camera to camera. And even record a separate log!"

Yeah... I can't help but give credit to the brains of the Terra Group engineers. A separate log, you say?

A machine gun? Carefully tracking all the movements of a person?

And what, they just replace the camera with an M-249, why the hell not…

If necessary, you can also manually control the machine guns, there are several control sticks on the remote control. You can even use the mouse on your computer. Not so different than a computer game.

But the shooting gradually subsides, moving away somewhere to the left. This is good, because these noisy comrades already might have tripped over one of my surprises. I'm afraid that then the resolution in their fight could have been very surprising and random!

But they left...

After about an hour I leave the warehouse carefully. Thinking through it, I realize that it makes sense to place all manner of explosives on the nearest approaches. Why do I need a crowd of curious people who want to study an unknown structure? Of course the first of them will simply be dead, but human curiosity multiplied by greed is a terrible thing! There will be crowds of people wandering around, looking for any opportunity to bypass the closed gate. And we also have to eat sometimes! You can't be satiated by car oil!

I crawl on my belly around the neighborhood and set up a couple of tripwires, and once again I visit the car service center to check on the bandits who live there. But no, the firefight at our warehouse did not seem to affect them and led to no changes in the behavior of the inhabitants of the den.

That's good…

With a night vision device on his head, Oleg is now crazily steering the forklift around the unlit warehouse, mastering a new approach to driving. Once again, I estimate possible options for the events soon to unfold. Hard to say that the local people are careless and lazy, the entire security setup testifies to the contrary. But that is why I did not doubt the success of the forthcoming operation.

Why not?

It's simple!

People are smart, they have a good idea where danger might come from,

and in what form. They build their defenses accordingly. If you can fire at the object from only hundreds of meters, then no one will put out guards a kilometer out. But an amateur like me will be afraid of everything, scared of every rustle. That's why his actions are unpredictable...

According to Kaban's information, the guys here are pretty smart and skilled. Well, excessive intelligence combined with arrogance hasn't done anybody much good.

It's evening…

Usually, nobody's going out around town at this time, it's fraught with danger. You might not reach your destination.

But I don't have much choice, I lie in position, having attached the night vision to my weapon, and I'm trying to somehow ensure Oleg's unimpeded advancement. It helps that the forklift does not growl like an ordinary car, and if it goes slow enough you can hardly hear it. He reaches our earlier test point reached relatively quickly, the route was tested and partially covered by my surprises.

It isn't so much fun after that.

I move forward, looking around as much as I could, and give orders by radio.

The forklift crawls a hundred meters and quiets down.

And again…

After a while, much closer to dawn, we're finally at the right point. We are lucky that the area is mostly deserted, with only business offices and similar buildings.

Okay, we unload the stuff and Oleg immediately leaves. Let him go, he did his job and did it well! Now I have to work with my hands...

And legs.

And all the other parts of my body.

I hook up ordinary towing cables to a streetlight and a concrete block, and I make a triangle loop with them. To the top of the loop, I attach the block, putting the extra-long self-pulling winch cable through it. I step back, unwinding this very cable and generously lubricate the ground with machine oil from the canisters I brought.

So…

I don't screw or hammer the self-pulling winch into the ground. I simply screw it to an ordinary water pump with clamps. Here, on the outskirts, they were still many sticking out of the ground.

Well, here we go!
I turn the handle of the winch.

Nothing happens at first, the cable isn't tight…

Then…

With a grinding noise the sled moved. I expected more resistance! That's not like dragging a 1.5-ton car! The generously lubricated ground wasn't the perfect surface for dragging loads. But little by little the turret moved...

The car service security doesn't react right away. No, they clearly hear the rumble, but do not think that it was about them. Just an unknown phenomenon. There is no obvious threat, no shots or shouts, and they are in no rush to give out their location.

But as the source of the sound approaches, suspicion increases bit by bit! Every now and then I look into the sight. I haven't seen any activity yet, but sooner or later somebody has to come out. I doubt very much that nobody

cares what the noise behind the fence is?

Aha!

A silhouette of a person appears in the greenish light of the night vision device.

I stop turning the handle and drop to the ground.

Okay, let's take a breath, or I'll shoot someone! However, I hope that we will make it through without shooting...

Right under the concrete block, on the side facing the gate, lies a piece of water pipe. A normal pipe, nothing special. Well, with some TNT inside, and a radio detonator, which is so common nowadays!

My finger pushes a button...

Boom!

Whether it hurt someone or not, it definitely sounded like a regular hand grenade! It wasn't for nothing that I sawed the explosives into pieces, so the boom wasn't too powerful.

So the guards and other bandits may have the impression that someone threw a grenade at the person who came out of the gates. And if so, the villain is very near, right behind the wall. And what will a person confident in the reliability of their defensive structures do? Certainly not run into the darkness. They will hide behind their fortifications, all confident and shit, waiting for unknown brazen attackers to climb over the fence, and that's when the attackers will be in big trouble!

Well, well... What did that one film character say?

“Wait..."

Let them wait.

Metal scraping, the installation moves forward. What they're thinking behind the fence, God only knows!

Obviously not a tank! Everything else isn't a direct threat. An ordinary car won't even reach the wall, the concrete blocks will prevent it. As for the gates leading into the building, they were barricaded from inside a long time ago, or at least I think that's the case. A surprise for the attackers.

Sure!

Surprises can come from the other side too…

The self-pulling winch stopped, there's a loop that's stopping the cable from winding on the drum. It wasn't an accident, I made it.

It's night!

It's dark... how do you see that the turret is in the right position?

That's how, you make a knot on the cable ahead of time to tell you when there's no need to turn the handle anymore!

I throw the winch on the ground, the remote control in my hands…

On, the LEDs winking happily, connecting with the sensors in the coverage area. I press the button, the self-test has started. There are very interesting things happening there now. The servo drives quietly buzz, leveling the position of the heavy metal device relative to the terrain. It shouldn't stand at an angle, so the armored cap shifts, the bullets should go clearly above the ground, not into the clouds and not into the dirt! A machine gun is not made for shooting at the sky! The smart machine also syncs with the sensors, determining the zones of confident lethality. When we installed the first turret on the roof we acted like idiots, so we had to reset everything. Advanced equipment, as it later turned out, allows for a lot of

different settings, adjustments and modes. It is a pity that now I can't operate the machine gun directly, then this thing would have been perfect! But even now the thing turned out very dangerous.

The remote control in my hands, I press the button!

There are no special noise effects, ordinary electric detonators slam quietly. Not loud, but they did the job. The cables are now cut, I can pull them back. Let the people in the morning scratch their heads, asking how this metal piece of shit made it to the gate? On its own? After all, there was no transport here!

What, someone might think that...

It's okay, guys, think, rack your brains!

The remote control vibrates, the sensors have calibrated and synced with the control unit.

Now combat mode!

LEDs are blinking, the order is received.

Now I pull back from here and initialize the second part of the plan.

Which is make it to certain spot and go to sleep…

What?

I have a couple hours before dawn, there's still time to rest. Waking promises to be noisy, I won't sleep through it!

Tra-ta-ta-ta!

The dry clicks of the M-249 make me open my eyes.

Morning?

Well, judging by the shots, breakfast has already passed. The crowd looked around, didn't see any mysterious villains, and with a clear conscience sat down to eat. And then they went on a scouting run!

That's when they met my friend...

It's great that I'm not dealing with amateurs! People are smart, understandable, and predictable. It is quite natural that upon seeing an enemy machine gun at their gate, they wouldn't attack directly. Being clever people, they will try to carefully bypass the villain around the side. It is also quite natural that this route is thought out and prepared in advance. There will be no sharp metal, hidden pits and other troubles. But they may have a tripwire somewhere! And for this reason, I did not get close to the fence. I'm fine here, thanks.

ButI did install a few rubber bands ripped out of an exercise device, and stuck them between a couple of dug-in pieces of wood.

An ordinary F-1 hand grenade inserted into a glass. Pins removed, of course, why would they be needed now?

According to logic some backup groups are walking to the wall to take some secret paths to get behind the machine gunner. Well, I don't know where all these paths are. It was enough for me to find one.

Twang!

A glass with a grenade flew over the fence, launched off the makeshift slingshot.

A grenade launcher would probably have been better, but I don't have one. And I've never had the chance to shoot one before. I saw it a couple of times, but that's it.

I think the F-1 will go off all the same...

And the second glass has gone!

Bam-bam!

Wow!

I have to assume the inhabitants of the car repair center appreciated this greeting. As if to say “You'd better all stay inside…”

There's nothing else to do here, so just in case I stick a couple of unpleasant gifts around and quickly get out of the dangerous place.

And at the gate... everything was super fun!

As I already said, from far away the turret looks like the tower of some armored vehicle. Or a quick-assembly fire point, I've seen that once in the army. How did the unknown villains manage to install such a structure in the dark, my opponents must now be wondering. I have no doubt that they already have some ideas. Good luck to them with that!
Let them think about their enemies. Something tells me the list of them will be quite impressive...

There are two bodies lying in front of the gate, seems the others were luckier. The M-249 is silent, no targets visible.

But judging by the bullet marks on the wall, which are clearly visible through binoculars, attempts to somehow bypass the unexpected obstacle were made more than once. I hope it hurt someone there, too.

The besieged tried to return fire, of course. With a well-predictable result—it's hard to take this shit even with a heavy machine gun. But no one’s going for that, the tower it’s on can easily be shot. And since the bullets of the turret fly far beyond the range of target detection, the people behind the fence have clearly already made their choice. There are no suicidal people

in their ranks.

I wonder what will happen next?

Well, they won't dig, will they?

According to the most conservative estimates there are already a couple dead and some injured. Perhaps seriously wounded, the F-1 is a very nasty weapon! It is clear that there are some food in the car service center. It is possible that there is also water. So death from hunger and thirst does not threaten anyone. Logically speaking it makes sense to wait for the evening. And for some reason it seems to me that the bandits will do just that.

I've already thought about that, that's why I'm quietly pulling myself into the building where my sleeping quarters are.

Waiting for the night?

I have nothing against it, I'll sleep in the meanwhile. Only inform Oleg first, the man must be worrying…

They woke me up with distant machine gun bursts.

I have to make a little caveat here.

I worked some magic with the settings and set up two guard perimeters. Entering the first one made the turret wake up when motion was detected. But it did not shoot. When the second perimeter was reached it opened fire, which lasted until the target crossed the furthest line. The cunning device gave attackers an opportunity to crawl out from behind cover and get closer to the turret over open space. Then it started shooting at them. And continued to fire on the retreating, a complete imitation of an ordinary sentry.

An evil and very dangerous sentry.

So in front of the gate a few more dead bodies appeared, most likely.

I listen…

No, the machine gun's quiet.

Is the scouting mission over?

Chapter 24

In the morning I prudently didn't approach the battlefield, instead I looked at the object through binoculars from afar.

The inhabitants of the car service are clearly not stupid! It's clear why Kaban doesn't like them, leading guys like that is hard. I don't know how, but they managed to get behind the enemy! I mentally give them a thumbs up. However, it didn't help much, I counted three dead bodies. That's probably not everyone, the shooting didn't last just a couple of minutes!

Yeah... I don't have anything to do anymore. It may even be that not everybody is dead. Some of the surviving smartasses are quite capable of taking a position between me and the turret. Well, let them sit there, I think they will be waiting for guests for a long time! Especially from my side!

But closer to lunch the besieged made a statement!

Suddenly the gate opened, and outside rolled… something!

A certain construction...

It used to be a truck. It was some kind of armored recovery vehicle or something like that, based on a Kamaz Automobile Plant truck.

Now it is covered with metal sheets, becoming a kind of guntruck—I saw them in American films. Two long metal rods stick out of the front bumper. And on those they had attached a metal sheet. Thick enough to keep the front wheels from being shot. There is no doubt that 5.45 mm will not work! And a more serious caliber is not likely to break through either! The sheet hangs at an angle, so the probability of ricochet is very high. The guntruck's cabin is also covered with iron sheets, with only narrow viewing slits.

Most likely, this vehicle was made a while ago, in case of something, so to speak. In any big showdown this thing could be the decisive argument. But they had to release this monster before that.

Slowly, shaking on the uneven ground and thundering with iron, the unit drove between the blocks, one of which suddenly turned on the spot, opening the passage. Wow! Smart guys are definitely sitting there behind the fence, they even made this trick! I didn't notice anything... But I'm sure there were some cables or ropes there!

Idiot...

Bullets fell again the guntruck metal, the turret was calibrating its shot. What good would that do? Although the gun did not have any doubts. We have a target, so we are firing!

And ricochets started off the armor of the homebrew truck...

That's it.

It's time to scram.

Although I'm sitting far enough away, I shouldn't risk it in vain!

Now this device will drive the last hundred meters, and…

And what?

They’re going to stand with their side to the gun to cover…

Who?

Doesn’t matter, they’re not gonna make it.

As soon as this nightmare of a car makes it thirty meters to the turret…

That's why I'm running away so fast!

BOOM!

Yeah…

Twenty kilo of TNT is nothing to sneeze at!

Well, I can consider the task accomplished, I've scared them enough, I think that now they're even go to the bathroom fully armed, covering each other during the whole process. So with a calm conscience I can go home. I'm not in any hurry to see the crime scene, so to speak, or see the fruits of my labor. Who did curiosity kill? Exactly...

* * *

"Well?" Kaban murmured. "What's so terrible? Show me!"

The meeting between the two leaders took place quite calmly. It was as if there was no confrontation and mutual flexing. A messenger came from Vovan the Long in the morning and asked the gangster to visit him as soon as possible.

"And what about him?" Lorick asked, having listened to the message. "Was he too lazy to come here in person?"

He was the chief of the boss's security, so he did not ask such questions out of idle curiosity.

"He got shot." The messenger shook his head. "He can barely walk now. It'll take him until lunch to make it to the wall!"

Everyone understood the main issue—the subordinate asked for a meeting with the main boss. The necessary words were said, he admitted his position. And the defeat in the confrontation that was just starting.

The clever Kaban calculated everything well. And that's why he didn't go that same day. Which can't be said about Lorick's helpers, these guys ran out within an hour. It was necessary to check the route. A request is good, of course, but nobody cancelled caution!

The boss only moved ahead the next day, after receiving confirmation from Lorick about the safety of the route along the entire length. His guys did not stop there—they took up positions in some places to cover their boss as he moved. The chief of security liked his new job, and he had no intention of losing it.

And now, having made his way to the former car service center, Kaban listened to the leader of the racers.

“Let's go…" He got up from his place with difficulty, leaning on a crutch. The bandit's right leg was wrapped in bandages, and he not only moved, but also spoke, slowly. He wasn’t looking like himself from just a week earlier. When they got out beyond the wall, the boss looked at it and he couldn't help noticing the fresh bullet marks!

But that wasn’t the main thing.

“Holy shit, that must have been some explosion!” He even whistled upon seeing the space in front of the gates.

Near the large funnel was the guntruck, twisted by the explosion. It hadn’t caught fire or fell to pieces. But the shards of shrapnel made it resemble a colossal strainer. The frame of the car was bent, and the front left wheel, or rather, what was left of it, was almost half a meter above the ground. The cabin, on the other hand, was deformed in such a way that even at first glance it was clear that no one could have survived.

“Yeah…” Vovan the Long wheezed. “We were all shell-shocked at the base... Who knew that these bastards would lay a mine? And such a big one!”

He didn't exaggerate at all. Fragments of shrapnel covered a pretty large area. The charge must have been serious.

“Whose soup did you spit in?”

“Well... these things... Only USECs have them…”

“What thing?”

Vovan nodded at the gate, to say that they had already seen everything, and it was time to go back. The Boss didn’t mind, seeing it would convince anyone!

“Well..." The leader of the racers spoke, sinking into his seat. “At first, we thought it was just an armored cap. You know, soldiers used to make them in the past... Dig a hole, drag in metal, you can build it and dismantle it quickly. You can build a decent one in a couple of hours. Overnight too. From afar this thing looked just like an armored cap.”

He took a breath, drank some water.

“They started shooting when the boys made it out in the morning. Two of them were killed at once, and one of them died later. Two more got hurt, but not fatally... Well, we immediately started to flank them. But it turned out they thought of that. And they threw a couple of grenades from behind the fence—a lot of people got hurt. If it weren't for the cars…”

In fact, the car service yard was filled with all sorts of cars. Old cars, which have been here since time immemorial, and new cars, recently stolen from car dealerships. There wasn’t time to get them out of the city... Their sides took most of the fragments. But still, a lot of people got hit.

“Are you saying that someone was sitting there too?”

“Well, grenade rains are not very common. And later one of the guys got caught in a tripwire, another one dead. We dismantled the rest…”

The racer nodded at his close friend and a grenade was placed on the table in front of the leaders.

“This is not an F-1. And not even an RGD-5. A fucking foreign one!”

Kaban twisted the grenade in his hands, nodded.

“Continue.”

“Sure… We got into the car, grabbed a grenade launcher, and then we moved on this thing. I looked at it through binoculars—it's a robot! There was no one living in there, they couldn’t move like that! And the bullets didn't pierce our armor…” Vovan the Long took a breath. “You can't approach for a straight shot, the machine covers everything for 300 meters! Because of the armor... there was no chance. This shit can only be taken at point-blank range.”

“Got it. I saw what happened, it blew up…”

“Yeah... that's where I got it.”

“There's nothing else like that around?”

“The boys have scoured everything... Nothing yet.”

“And how did they bring it here at all? It weighs a lot!”

“Yeah... Fuck knows... It must have crawled by itself somehow. Maybe it has tracks below? After the explosion it’s hard to tell, must have been 30 kilo in there!”

“Okay!” Kaban got up. “I saw everything I needed. I'll send a doc, I got a good one… He will help you, and your boys need looking after. You got food?”

“Yeah…”

“Then get well! I need you alive, and I need you on your feet! As for USECs ... okay, we'll chat with them... They won't come here anymore, I promise!”

* * *

Today we sleep.

And tomorrow, too, we need to relieve the tension of the last days somehow. And we also need to eat, since when crawling on my belly, I was eating simple stuff.

However, Oleg has already gone somewhere downstairs bright and early. He is in his element, fiddling with all sorts of gadgets and happy to do it. Some part of me really understands him, regular work distracts from the horror that reigns outside the walls of our bunker.

A bunker?

Hmm… That’s a good word for it! I’m not going to call it a gasoline storage facility, am I? By the way, that's the reason, I suppose, why none of the owners have come here so far. Auto parts and fuel, we reason, are not the kind of goods for which it is worth risking the lives of your people. Busy traffic won’t return to the streets of Tarkov any time soon.

By the way...

Not just gonna lay around!

The program for generating keys works very well! And if that’s the case... Adding a line of code and entering it into the computer that controls access is a task that will take a couple of hours. Especially since the flash key is the thing that gives access to it. Changing the password is a routine task. Now, no previously made key can disable the security system.

That's it!

Only Oleg and I, no one else will be able to get in here anymore. So the former owners will be met not by the hospitably opened doors, but by machine gun fire at point-blank range! By the way, I need to ask the technician, have him set up a couple more turrets, we'll shove them around the area. That way no one could even approach the code reader. We'll leave a small hole for ourselves, where we can exit.

Some work! It's much more pleasant to work than to just lay on my side on a bunk!

The day passes in intense work, which didn't make either of us sad.

Khohol got in touch the next day.

"An old acquaintance wants to talk."

"Which one is that?"

"The one who sent the package recently," the speaker of the radio station tells me.

"The same person will come from us. Tomorrow, at two o'clock."

"Done!"

At the same time, I should drop by Gavrish's, get some food—he has decent stocks in his warehouses.

Again, I'm acting against all logic.

If I listened to smart books, they'd tell me to hold on to these warehouses with my teeth!

Mm-hmm...

That's where those teeth would have stayed.

I don't have any gang of my own, and I'm not a master of creating them. How do I command people, what can I do to keep them busy? And where can I recruit people? Run an ad on the Internet? Yeah...

It's not even funny.

I'm not a gangster leader at all. They'll find that out in the first twenty minutes. But confuse someone, that I can do... Let the bandits think, “What kind of a man is this, that gives something like that so easily? He must be pretty rich…”

And there's another idea here!

Don't touch my people!

Someone raises his hand against one of my people, and the whole group gets utterly destroyed! The example of the late Foma fits well into this narrative.

"Don't touch Predator's people—you'll live longer!”

Something like that…

Before I go out, I look at myself in the mirror.

Well, a little bit rounder.

Though not too noticeable.

But in my hair... goddamn, what is that? Grey hair?

Holy shit! Isn't it a little early?

An inner voice sarcastically comments: "What do you mean early? In the current environment?”

And the voice is right.

How could you not be gray?

But the expression of my face has become quite unusual. Not evil, as one might expect, but rather, tired. My cheekbones protrude, and my forehead is creased...

No, I don't know this man in the mirror.

But Kaban, I hope, will recognize me.

Chapter 25

But it was Gavrish I met first. How is it that he found out about my visit? Only God knows!

I can't rule out the usual coincidence. Although someone giving him a friendly heads up is also quite possible—where is the ataman and where is Kaban? The second one is formidable, but far away. And this one is near!

But in the room of the point of sale, I saw Gavrish sitting at the table and talking peacefully with the trader. At the sight of me they both demonstrate their hospitality, and a bottle of cognac and a light snack appear on the table. All my issues were solved unexpectedly quickly. The ataman immediately agreed to organize a convoy to the point I indicated. He asked me to come by the factory sometime and then he politely (which is not like him!) left. As I understand it, he now has a reserve location. Well, that's understandable, it's much more convenient to defend the plant! And there are ways to retreat, unlike his camp.

But the conversation with the trader suddenly dragged on and was extremely interesting! Well, first of all, I had things to offer. Like tools, fuel, and some other useful things. Not all the goods from the bunker were equally useless, some could be sold. And they were in demand. So the conversation turned out to be interesting. And Mr. Ogryzko told me some rumors, too. I must say, I learned a lot of useful things from this conversation.

Man, there was a reason in the old days traders and spies weren't considered all that different…

That's just Khokhol! And what might Prapor know? The local gun baron must be aware of many interesting things! And stopping in to visit the Hood is also worthwhile, I can give him an old flash drive, for example. It is a pity that I am not personally familiar with the Nurse, visiting her would be worthwhile too!

A knock on the door and Kaban shows up on the doorstep.

Sledgehammer carefully retreats, ignoring the gun being handed to him. Yeah, so Ogryzko drew some conclusions from the recent dialogue. All clients are equal, but some are more equal.

The bandit hums, satisfied, holsters his weapon and walks up to the table.

He sits down and downs half a glass of cognac in one fell swoop. Shoots a questioning eye to the trader, who politely grumbles about urgent matters and disappears in the back room.

“Cheers!”

Sure…

The cognac falls nicely into my belly, warmth fills my body again.

“I've seen your art..." The thug mumbles, stabbing a piece of canned ham with a fork. “Did you get into bed with the USECs?”

“Why?”

“It’s their handwriting. A machine gun, dynamite, some robot... You stopped short of bringing a tank at least! That's not how we work here!”

“But there are no questions coming your way either.”

The leader of the large gang—and you can now call him that without the slightest doubt—smiles.

“You are a diplomat!”

“We came to an understanding, I accepted the job. Of course I have a direct interest in not having any suspicions fall on you. And how I achieve that…”

I shrug.

“Yeah, you’ve achieved something…" Kaban smirks. “Okay!”

On the table, unnoticed by everyone else, a decent pack of money appears, euros.

“I gave out the order, you executed it. We square?”

I'm guessing that there are at least ten thousand euro there. Quite a decent amount! Although... the turret alone costs more.

I look him questioningly, and another pack falls on the table, thicker this time. This is better, you can't look like a gullible idiot, it will cost you more.

“Square.”

After all, I’m not gonna drag this thing and sell it.

Then the cheerful bandit splashes more cognac in his glass. We clink glasses and have a drink.

“The next question is for your boss. We need to... We need to get into the port.”

“And?”

“Some guys dug in. Losing all pretense of order, not following the code!”

“Misha Falin?”

Kaban looks pissed.

“Do you know him?”

“Heard of him.”

“He’s a rule-breaker... he doesn't respect the law of thieves at all!”

“Did he become like that just now?”

It's not guesswork. I've heard things before about showdowns at the port. In their time, brigades of former sportsmen dug in there (back in the distant peace times, by the way). Taking advantage of acquaintances and connections at the top, they organized one of the first private security firms in the city. They were knocked out of the city and markets, but in the port, or more specifically, in the warehouse terminal, these dudes sat like a nail in the wall! The war on city gangs was very serious even then, with victims on all sides. This piece turned out to be too tasty. No one wanted to give it up. It’s natural to assume that the notorious Falin was one of these "sportsmen." So there is nothing surprising in the fact that the old enmity has survived in present conditions.

My guess was right.

“No..." The bandit frowned. “He was always such a dumb asshole. And now he still behaves the same. In short, I won't have a conversation with him.”

“And what do you need?”

“Before this whole mess the leadership of Terra Group already knew something. Or they were guessing it would happen, no matter. And that's why they took measures to strengthen USEC’s presence in every possible way. Well, not only them, but that doesn't matter!”

He pours some cognac, but he's in no hurry to drink.

“So some cargo came. Different stuff, but valuable! And in our non-conventional conditions even more so! How they managed to hide it on paper, fuck knows! But instead of bullets, they marked it as spoons and forks and other stuff. Hell if someone finds it!

He drinks.

“We know where it is and how to take it. Tell Mishka that even if he finds it, there will be a desert for a good hundred meters around. I think he has a pretty good idea how careful those people were when they brought in shipments like this.”

“Okay,” I tilt my head. “And what is his interest in it?”

“There are four containers there, do you understand?”

I understand very well!

“So we get two! And that’s not up for debate! We give him one. His land, and we admit it. You have to understand that this concession is worth something! And the fourth one—let your boss think. If no one else dances here but you, the container leaves with you. If you get any help, pay them from your end.”

“And what’s inside? They will ask.”

Kaban hums and puts a stack of stapled paper in front of me.

So…

Assault rifles, hand-held machine guns, that's understandable! So we skip the page with the description of ammunition, and it is clear there will be more than enough of it there.

"Personal armor protection equipment" - wow! And how much of this stuff is there?

The answer is on the next page. Most likely the person who made the documents did it hastily or simply did not understand English very well.

"...The contents of each container are intended for arming and equipping a standard assault unit. It ensures its functioning for at least thirty days, provided that there is an equipped deployment base…"

Okay, so...

If my memory and vision don't lie, I've read something about these assault units. And I read it recently!

Some papers from Makar's safe, for sure!

How many people are in such a group?

The management group is five, the communications group is five, the support group is four, and ten people make up the heavy weapons and fire support groups. There's also several rapid response groups. There were only about forty people in total. Whether they are all taken into account in the formation of such cargo we don't know. But even if there's equipment for only thirty people... It's gift from heaven!

Yeah, you have to carry that gift away first.

“Well…" I shrug my shoulders. “Obviously I will get back to you.”

“And when should we expect an answer?”

“Well…” I shrug. “I'll get in touch, ask to be accepted, explain everything, and we'll wait for an answer. As you know, I'm not the biggest dude here. I need to stop by and talk to Falin anyway. There is something to discuss…”

“Okay," the man nods. “Then that's what we'll do…”

Chapter 26

When I get to my old lair, I drop on the couch. I also contact Oleg on the radio and warn him about my absence. Let him sleep peacefully and not worry.

And I think…

What are my chances for a successful negotiation with the unknown Mishka?

None really… Do you think things are bad for him in the port? It's a whole city of its own. You can probably find anything in the world there. And if they couldn't kick him out of there back in the day using the united forces of various groups, he won't listen to me: I don't have anyone behind me!

Okay, let's try a different approach…

Who's he gonna listen to?

Well, maybe someone who feels good near him, who doesn't mind being his neighbor.

And who do we have like that?

All day long I sit at my computer copying the contents of the disks and encrypting the files on the device. However, I make a list of contents in a separate file and leave it in the root directory. I'm very lucky to have found a decent amount of external storage at the warehouse, I've brought a whole backpack of them here! That's where things from the computer go...

It's a familiar job, and although my fingers forgot how to use the keyboard a little, it's going pretty quickly. Clearly I can't copy the contents of all the disks, that would take a lot more time, and I simply don't have that much external storage. Not that it's necessary to copy everything. An insurance of

sorts.

I stayed up far later than midnight, but I finished the majority of the work.

Now I can sleep...

I pack seriously this time. My rib healed, but I have no desire to tempt fate anymore. That's why I place the armor plates in the tactical vest, and my ammunition is replenished to the maximum possible capacity. I will need to come up with something, the last time my bullets didn't pierce the vest, so I need a more powerful weapon.

Which is a challenge!

I don't like to make noise, and I'm used to the ZIG. And what do I have that's more powerful? It will be louder and obviously heavier…

A shotgun?

Well, it's powerful, of course, but it's heavy!

Okay, I'll stock up on grenades—in case of an incident, the blast wave is capable of throwing even the most motivated opponent against the wall so hard that all the fight goes out of them.

If you want to live long, don't make noise!

I came up with this saying myself, and I try to act in accordance with what I say. I walk quietly and carefully. It is better to look around one extra time, listen, then quickly move to a new point. Get there and listen again. That method bears fruit—a team of some strange people passed by already. Well, everything is simple. Not Bears, not USECs, which means they're Scavs. And what tribe they're from... whatever! None of them are my friends!

Sectarians? Well, I guess not, they look different. So bandits of some kind, which is not any better! Either way, they'll shoot first. So let them pass. I

have a specific goal, so I will slowly move towards it. But it isn't possible to pass completely quietly. I noticed my tail in the evening, having made it most of the planned route. I don't know how I found the tail. Maybe I felt someone's gaze or something. But my soul immediately became anxious, and my legs felt like lead.

So, a fucking tail! Somebody is following me now! Roll under a wall, and it's quiet. No shots, no grenades, nothing. But I couldn't be so wrong! It was a familiar feeling! It will soon get dark, I must look for a roof over my head! Sleeping on the sidewalk is not an option. Sorry, but I'm not an extreme tourist! I choose an entrance to a residential building and climb to the third floor. Why the third floor? You could throw something on the second floor from below. It will be more difficult to throw something all the way on the third floor, and you can hardly hear anything from there. It is relatively easy to understand which room someone's sleeping in on the second floor from listening for the sound of breathing. But to make out which room on the third floor someone is in is hard! Especially with unbroken windows.

It is also possible to escape quickly from here, a thin but strong rope is tied to the heater for just that purpose. A jumper from the second floor will certainly be expected downstairs, but from the third and higher they except just the body they might later put in a coffin. Because a jumper from third and higher will break his legs, or at the very least somehow hurt himself. He won't have a chance to run for sure. But nobody expects anyone to use a rope. Somehow that idea didn't take root here...

I have a new door opener now, much better than the old one! Oleg really went at it. So I break into the door I want without much noise. But then... my activity looked like anything but sleep preparation. I have a little bit of steel wire. Well, one roll. Only about fifty meters. But it is enough to pull it across the doorway. I also have self-tapping screws that go into the doorway like butter. Long, eighty millimeters each, these are not easy to pull out of wood. And their tops are wide, really easy to wrap with wire, it won't come off.

Like the hardened villain I am, I didn't pull the wire right across the door,

but made a wide noose out of it. The lower part is on the floor, but the upper part is raised to about the knee level. It's not really visible in twilight. In the dark you can't see it at all. Now to go deep into the apartment and wait. The villain appeared about an hour later, when I had already started to take doze off.

There was a noise downstairs.

Not pinning much hope on the wind and carelessness of the former janitors, I scattered a handful of some thin plastic stuff on the stairs. What this plastic used to be, fuck if I know, some plastic piece of crap. These things were hanging in one of the offices that I rummaged through, looked like strangely shaped snowflakes on long threads. I would have walked by, but I accidentally stepped on one of these lying on the floor. It crunched very loudly! I became interested and pulled out another one on purpose and put it under my sole! Crunchy! The weight of these things was almost non-existent, and they fit comfortably, stacking into each other. The weight and volume were insignificant.

This idea was suggested to me by Stepanych when he shared some stories from his past.

"We scattered dry peas on the floor, you can't walk quietly through it!" he once told me.

Well, I don't have peas now, but these grayish snowflakes successfully replace them.

Yeah, so the client is on the second floor.

Well… we'll wait.

Nothing else crunched, the villain passed my simple alarm.

And meanwhile it has already become noticeably dark, visibility has become quite shitty. But my unknown guest, it seems, was not bothered

much by that, because he didn't change his pace. When I set up in the apartment, I opened one of the windows. That way, if the front door to the apartment is opened, that can be written off to an inevitable draft. You can even feel the wind, there is a weak breeze.

The guest stops in front of the door and listens for a while. But I have a mesh scarf stretched over my face, it helps stifle the sound of my breath. Stuffy, but I'm alive!

The draft has increased—the front door opens gently. But still the villain is standing on the stairs, he doesn't go inside the apartment. Patient devil, I respect that.

Barely audible movement, there he is!

The thud of a falling body announced that my trap worked. A stretched wire can be felt with your foot, but everything is a little different in this case. The wire moved just a little bit, but a common skillet fell off the self-tapping crew that was its hanger. Not only is it loud, the skillet is also cast iron! Almost two kilograms, and the loop tightened around his leg!

Even a person with steel nerves can't withstand it!

The villain tried to run, but he didn't have a chance.

His body collapsed to the ground.

A click and the figure of my visitor appears in the eyepieces of the night vision goggles.

Some patchy man with an axe! Fuck, I was expecting at least a sawed off!

An axe... hmm…

"Who are you?"

A deadly weapon rushes past my head: the dude threw it competently and accurately! A little to the side and I would have been dead! Well, dear, I'm not much for compassion either!

The gun claps, and the man grasps his leg, cursing.

"Who are you?!"

But he doesn't stop, he tries to jump up, falls, tries again… And at the same time a flow of such nasty expressions erupts from his lips that a sailor would blush! The metal in his hand shines and then I shoot. This time to kill!

With a ring the knife falls on the floor.

That's it, this one isn't running any more.

Who the hell is this character?! Where did he come from? With an axe…

I examine the body. In a sports bag (!) over his shoulder is a can of food. In his pocket there is a roll of bandages.

And that's it.

Who, from where, why is he here—fuck knows. Yeah… this is strange. No, not the fact that someone wants to kill me, that's something I've been used to for a long time. But the fact that the man chose such an exotic attack. I look at the axe which is buried deep inside the wardrobe wall. He would've sliced my head off easily! No, it wasn't that simple. That dude hunted other people besides me like that.

But the question is: is he running around alone like this or what?

I exit to the stairs and listen… So far, it's quiet. But that doesn't mean anything yet, this dude didn't really announce his arrival as a form of psychological warfare.

I go down one flight of stairs and I make a simple trap there, a fine thread over the stairs. The thread hangs loosely and does not look like a tripwire like they are usually shown in movies and games. One end of the thread is tied to the trash pipe, the other is just wrapped around a grenade detonator which is lying on its lever and of course doesn't have a pin. They will pull the thread with their foot carelessly, the grenade will fall on its side and click the lever, releasing the fuse.

I go a floor higher (having untied the rope from the heater) and climb over the balcony to the next entrance to the building.

Bullshit?

But that's exactly what those who tracked my movement will think. Now it is already dark, and doubtful anybody on the street uses night vision to trace the movements of anybody on balconies. They'd have to be utterly paranoid…

What about me?

Am I that far from being paranoid?

Not really, and that's why I'm alive.

I don't have a rag, but I do have duct tape! It does the job well enough—the pieces of glass it's stuck to do not fall to the floor of the balcony with a crash. I can remove the rest from the window frame myself just using my hands.

But this is not the end, I leave one more surprise in this apartment, and then I move on the fifth floor. Here I tie the rope to the balcony railings, a tangle covers the corridor, and I drag all manner of possible junk and chairs to the door so it's impossible to open it with just a push of the shoulder. The wardrobe would have worked better, but it wouldn't have been possible to move silently…

Will they let me fucking sleep tonight or what?

They choose the latter: the explosion of a grenade ripped me from Morpheus' arms.

Where is that? In my entrance or the other one?

Judging by the absence of groans and screams, the other one.

Well, I did get an hour! That's not too bad.

Another grenade went off downstairs after another half-hour, and then I got really worried! What kind of people were they? They already have losses and, taking into account the power of these grenades, serious losses, but these dudes did not give up their goal. And silence. No screams, no groans. Of course, someone might assume that the explosions are killing the villains right away, on the spot. But in my experience I can say that this rarely happens.

And if so...

I don't think I'm being attacked by a gang of mute people. That dude swore very masterfully. That means they're silent even if they're wounded?

It's not funny...

I keep lucking into meeting very strange people! Those cultists, these fucking axesmen. I'm pretty sure they started searching both sides at once, from the bottom and through the balcony where I retreated. So they have someone that's a tracker or something?

They determined the way I was left, figured out the way, blocked the entrance and went through the balcony. If that's true, and my inner voice insisted it is, the situation sucked. This entrance is on the corner. And there is no way to climb onto another balcony, there are no more balconies here.

Yes, I have weapons and bullets. Also have grenades, they won't get me easily! But who said that the attackers don't have grenades?

The rope!

Are they waiting for me downstairs?

Doubtful...

But I'm probably not gonna be able to climb onto the roof. In any case I won't be able to do it quietly. And the roofs here are flat, not much cover. I could be killed from the next house over with one shot.

Well... we'll risk it!

I carefully sneak up to the balcony door, then I slip out. I switch on the night vision device!

I look around the neighborhood.

If someone is guarding, this person has to see this wall of the house. Or at the very least the windows!

And where would such a spy sit?

Well... a good question. Anywhere, really.

But!

It is not enough to see, you also need to react somehow! If he has an assault rifle, that's bad, they will shoot me on the fly. It'll take me some time to get down there...

And if he has an axe, he'll have to run up to me somehow! No matter how you turn it, he has to run twenty or twenty-five meters! Before that my feet will touch the ground!

And then I do not envy this runner.

Something squeaks on the stairwell!

Completely automatically I drop the rope, coiled into a ring.

A jerk! Checking the strength of the knot and the strength of the rope...

Let's go!

Flying past the windows of the third floor I see a fleeting light inside the room—there is already someone there! I barely managed to slow down before I made it to the ground. A little too late, hit the ground so hard that my recovering rib makes itself known.

Shit...

I'm in a hurry to pull the twine attached to the rope. Finally it gives in and, quietly rustling, the rope falls at my feet. I quickly pick it up and try to roll it up. It turns out badly, rushing doesn't help any activity. Screw it, I pick up the ugly mess of rope and rush aside. I also pick up my backpack, which landed much earlier than me, since I tied it to the end of the rope. Going down with a load isn't the smartest idea.

The fence?

It's not too tall, it'll do!

I go over it, throwing my backpack beforehand. My heart beats so hard that I fear for the integrity of my ribs! I need to calm down! Breathe more evenly! Because I can be heard on the other side of the street…

There you go!

Carefully try to unravel the rope lump. Too bad I can't turn on the flashlight...

Yeah!

Little by little the ugly heap in my hands is beginning to take on more ordered shapes. A few more minutes, and the rope wrapped in a coil and goes into its place. I latch it to my backpack. By the way, the idea with the tied twine is not mine, I read it in a book somewhere. An interesting idea! You tie a rope using a special knot, and at the end of it tie a thinner and lighter twine. If you pull it the knot unravels and the rope falls under its own weight. You can pick it up and take it with you. It's not that I'm greedy, there's all sorts of ropes and cables in stock. But it's worth it to confuse anyone chasing you so that he can puzzle over how his potential victim ran away. Why tell your enemy useful information?

The street is quiet.

Well, as quiet as it usually is in Tarkov. Somewhere something squeaks, rings out. Sometimes a shot will clap. But far away, not here. And so far nothing's happening here, my pursuers do not give themselves away...

So an hour passes.

No one ever showed up, and there was no movement on the street. I have to leave, I'll be better off!

Chapter 27

The meeting with the Hood takes place according to the previously approved scenario. Same square, same guy.

This time he nods affectionately at me, he recognizes me!

“Are you here on a trade matter?”

“Not just that. Although I am also interested in trading.”

I’m again led roundabout ways to confuse me. This ends in a small room where I also traditionally leave my weapons. At the sight of the two knives on my belt the accompanying person only bites his lip, but he doesn’t say anything. And doesn’t show his surprise. However, I now understand what exactly it is that’s hanging on my belt!

They ask me to open my backpack and check it with an electronic device. Looking for bugs? But what’s the point of this, there’s no satellite signal available here, so a beacon will not be useful. Or maybe I don’t know something? My eyes are covered and we take a long walk along several corridors. The smell of freshly dug earth is no longer present. Have they settled in?

But against my expectation the meeting is not in a dungeon, but in an office. And a quite well-furnished office!

“Have a seat,» the other person nods.

Neither hello, nor goodbye, where was he brought up? You need to be gentle with your client! Although considering the type of clientele…

“You have 20 minutes.”

The last time he was more polite!

I place the flash key on the table.

“This is a prelude to the conversation…”

His lips tremble.

“Okay…”

“Do you have a computer?”

“We will find one.”

On the table appears a hard disc dive. On it you can see the inscription: «Room 7 of the Internal Transport Department of the Port.”

“The root directory has a list of files. The main data array is encrypted. I warn you now, the password is known. But not to me…”

The trader lifts the disc and without looking hands it aside. A silent assistant takes the device and disappears unnoticed.

“You won’t study it in ten minutes.”

The trader suddenly smiles.

“Coffee?”

His coffee is not bad! Even brought sandwiches!

So this was going to be more than ten minutes. And another moment...

I lean over to the sandwich plate and my jacket opens to show the two knives on my belt. I knew from the sudden narrowing of the other person’s eyes that he saw them!

A knock on the door.

An assistant appears on the doorstep.

“We checked the contents…”

There’s a piece of paper on the table.

The trader looks through the list carefully.

“Mm-hmm... Yes, it’s of some interest. Your conditions?”

Okay, I have a bite!

“As far as I understand, this is your area of interest?”

“Not the only one I have. But I won’t lie, I need this information.”

“An immodest question... Are your clients aware of this?”

He shrugs his shoulders.

“Of course…”

“My higher ups understand that too. And that’s why I’m here. We would like to reach mutual understanding on a number of issues.”

The trader tilts his head.

“Are you familiar with this character, Falin?”

“Naturally.”

“Well he sells this information on the side.”

Oh, how his lips curl! I don’t envy a certain someone...

“To whom?”

“I’m not aware of that. But part of his cargo has not reached its destination.”

“Meaning?”

I put one of the knives on the table.
“Got it…”

“We have some interests in the port area. But Falin’s people are there. He is not a very capable contractor…”

“I know.”

After that, things got a little easier. I don’t know what’s on these disks, but the Hood needs them for some reason. And besides that he obviously wants to seriously punish someone who has not justified his trust. As I understand it the trader even recognized his handwriting on the explanatory label! And this clue can very much complicate the situation further, up to and including the death of the author of the note.

“Okay,” he sums up the situation. “My people will meet you and lead you to Falin. They will control the deal and the calculations so that there are no secret attacks or other misunderstandings. Preliminary negotiations are not your concern. We accompany the cargo to the Magistral, that’s where you take over it. Whose security will it be? Who will bring people? I need to know in advance so that no friction will arise at the meeting location.”

“Kaban. He will provide security and transportation in this area.”

“Is that so?” The Hood is surprised. “You became friends with him already? Hmm…”

“He’s keeping his end of the bargain. He also sometimes has situations

which he is not able to solve on his own."

"Kaban? Well, that's none of my business... When do I get the hard drives?"

"Twenty, including this one,» I nod at the list, «I give it back at once. Twenty more disks and the passwords at the place of the cargo transfer. I can provide the list right now."

"Okay,» the trader nods. "And what do you want for the flash key?"

"Normal relations. Is this thing worth that?"

He keeps silent for a while and draws something in pencil on a piece of paper.

"You, young man, are quite arrogant! Has anyone ever told you this before?"

"A couple times."

"To come to me with such a proposal you need to have very strong arguments! The last arrogant comrade did not live long enough to be able to assess his mistake. Think again."

"I'm not offering in my name. Who am I? A messenger... nothing more."

The man looks at my belt expressively.

"Well, sometimes I have to do various tasks for leadership." I feign embarrassment.

"Only them?"

Yeah, that's what you're interested in.

"Not only."

The Hood smiles.

“Should have started with that! Acting like a virgin in front of me. Tell your boss I’ll think about it. When you come for the cargo, we will figure out everything. But you’ll explain to me in detail how to find you…”

Anyway, we had a deal.

Back in my basement, looking through the disks, I realized that possessing information about what was imported and stored in the port warehouses can improve one’s own welfare a lot. Under one condition—controlling the whole territory of the port. Or having a powerful enough armed group to provide cover while you’re rustling around there. But if even Kaban himself doesn’t want to go there...

As it turned out from a conversation with the drug dealer, the entire port territory isn’t controlled by Mishka, only the warehouse terminal. It turns out that some strange soldiers are sitting in the port. They fenced themselves off with a wall, closed down, and allow nobody to come near them. And they shoot for any reason at all. UN helmets are sometimes seen. Although what they lost there is not clear to anybody. So it’s definitely not a good idea for a freelance gangster to go there.

No, the Bears or USECs could, of course, carry out such an operation. But will they share what they find there? Maybe they will pay once, but frankly speaking that’s not guaranteed…

And that’s not even speaking about these cult members. This is a very vague and incomprehensible group. Nobody knows where they have settled down, what they want, and where they are digging. But stick your nose in their affairs... It is possible not to get it back! We can do without helpers like that.

So the possession of this information does not promise me anything particularly pleasant. Well, maybe just the awareness of my inner coolness.

But that won't fill my pocket, and I can't put this on my plate. Is there much benefit from a ton of gold in the middle of the desert? You can't drink it, can you? But remembering some of the statements of the drug lord, I can play on this. He positions himself as the coolest dude on the information market.

«You don't have to look for other customers, nobody else will give more…»

His words?

I don't think he's only said that to me.

And suddenly there is someone else who understands these hard drives. I guess the Hood will be happy when he finds out about it. Such information already costs much by itself! And suddenly there's a traitor in his immediate environment. I strongly doubt that these two people don't know one another, they are sitting right next to each other! They have to be in contact. I don't know if they're sharing tea, but they do have some common issues!

The drug lord is much cooler. As it turned out, almost all the serious bandits know him. And many traders too. They know him, don't like him at all, but they don't go into conflict with him. So, this dude is hardcore and vindictive. Fuck his core, but vindictiveness will help me now! So Falin goes down the drain, let this drug dealer deal with him. And he'll owe me! Twice already. And if I give him half of the box that I picked up from Falin's couriers... At least I already copied almost all the info from them. And though there is no use in it yet, the fact that I have not lost information in vain warms my soul.

* * *

When the door closed behind the visitor, the trader sat thinking for a while. Then he pressed a button under his table, calling in a helper, who saw and heard the whole conversation thanks to the equipment installed in the room.

“Well?”

“He changed.”

“Yes, he lost weight and somehow became smaller, it is noticeable. He became tougher…”

“And he’s moving quite differently. If it weren’t for the face, I’d even guess it was a different person.”

“Explain,» the drug dealer looked up to the assistant.

“The movements... are more subtle… Economical! Like he’s preserving energy. Earlier to get something he helped himself with his other hand. To unzip his jacket or something. And then his hand went exactly to his pocket, I would even say it followed the shortest trajectory. The second hand is always near his weapon.”

“The knives?”

“Yes.”

“There were two of them.”

The boss’s assistant kept silent for a while, formulating the following sentence.

“I made inquiries... People have heard of the Predator. Prapor, Khokhol…”

“Khokhol obviously. Our guest is based somewhere near him. It would be strange if they didn’t communicate,» nodded the Hood. “Who else?”

“Nobody knows anything for sure. But this name is known to Forbet!”

But here the drug boss got tense! The name of the counterintelligence

agent was well known to him. It brought up unpleasant associations.

“And what did he say?”

“The Predator somehow managed to help them. It was something to do with the cultists. Anyway, our guest was paid back. And quite generously! After that he was taken to Veremeev.”

“Hmm! How is this cop doing?”

“Not bad, I gotta say. They solved their food problems somehow.”

Here the owner of the office has to think. He figured something out in his mind, pulled out a weathered notepad from his pocket, and flipped over a couple of pages.

“He mentioned Kaban… as far as I knew, Foma is dead. Very strange circumstances, by the way. In a lair, surrounded by his loyal people. Everyone dead. And there’s a coincidence—they found a lot of those blue bullets.”

“Ours… “
“I don’t know. Kaban is with him, and he is a very smart man! Foma… he was a relic of a past era. Just like me. But he could not understand that the world had changed! That’s what killed him.”

“Kaban ordered a hit of Foma?!”

“I don’t think so… He’s smart enough not to do that. And extremely careful. How will his people see it? No, it’s something else.”

“Is the Predator inviting us to cooperate?”

“Yes. At the same time, he paid very generously for the services. And here a question arises—why? Why does he need this union, he is not a trader, is he? All we have heard about him so far points to one thing: he’s a

murderer. You know what happened to Makar, don't you? He's not one of ours, he's one of those kids. Walked under Foma, but that didn't save him either! Not only did they destroy him, they killed everyone! Do you agree that such things do not happen without good reason? What happened in this case?"

"There were rumors…» Having caught the boss's surprised look, the assistant quickly recovered. "According to unverified intel, Makar managed to insult one of the Predator's men. Like really insult."

"Well, I wouldn't let that stand either!" The trader rubbed his chin. "I'm lost on one detail... Our visitor does not hide his enmity with the sectarians. And if the last time I was ready to write it off as a youthful bravado and foolishness, the desire to impress, now I'm not so sure. He has already killed two priests and is still alive! I think he understands what enemies he has made for himself. But he wears these spooky trophies openly!"

"Well, he does not look like an idiot."

"And how does his boss see it?"

"Well, since it was this man who brought the proposal for an alliance…» The other man shrugs. "You have to think that he has a positive view of him."

The drug dealer nodded.

"Okay... Contact Falin and let him come to me. Let's see how this deal goes."

* * *

I've been in some room for 24 hours with the windows closed from the outside and guards at the door. I wasn't given my guns back, but I was treated politely and they even brought food three times a day. Not anything special, but filling and not too bad. At my first request they'd take me to the

toilet, strange as it may seem, it worked! Man, it's just a regular toilet, but what a pleasure it brings!

I fall asleep because I can't do anything else. If the local boss suddenly changes his mind I just won't wake up, that's all. He may well decide that the bird in hand in the form of two dozen hard drives outweighs the possible consequences of cooperation with an unknown. And the leader of the port guards could justify his behavior. I really don't know much of the circumstance around me, and it can work against me. But the pleasant hanging around ended on the second day.

They knock on the door and the local host's assistant appears on the doorstep.

"You are asked to come."

Briefly and succinctly, as if to say: walk, my dear, now they will decide your fate.
This time, they don't blindfold me, the room where I was resting was in the same building as the boss's office. All the windows along the way are tightly closed, blinds and all that. I know there's two floors, so what? Or maybe three, I didn't walk down all the hallways, did I? So I don't have any connection to the terrain. What does it matter anyway? Nobody is going to storm this place. So the local leader is a drug dealer. I understand that this is bad, but what can I do? I don't have the strength and resources to resist him. Yes, I can stab him with a knife. Maybe even kill him if the guards don't kill me before that.

So what happens next?

Will his empire collapse?

Yeah, right. Perhaps a few dozen bandits will get buried to make room for new people. And it will continue smoothly. This business did not appear yesterday, it's existed for a long time. What, you think nobody knew about them? Special services were just too lazy?

There were no secret agents in the ranks? I'm sorry, but even an amateur like me wouldn't believe in such fairy tales for a second.

Such criminal structures do not exist on their own. Especially given the presence of powerful competitors like Terra Group. What, you're going to say that the whole business of my former employer was completely legal?

Right…

I didn't take part in it myself (and who would have taken part willingly), but rumors went around… Sitting in the flow of information, you inevitably begin to understand and analyze things. Like BLUE ICE, is it really just garden fertilizer? It is clear in official correspondence this this stuff was designated to act as a certain extremely useful and necessary reagent, but that's official correspondence! And in unofficial conversations some other words slipped through… They'd say our white and fluffy company is more gray and hairy, and definitely not as kind as it was presented in the press and on TV.

It's clear that Terra Group is not a drug lab. And they do not engage in any drug business. But they made this shit for something, didn't they? At an industrial scale, by the way… And who, pray tell me, would tolerate such clear competition as the Hood right next door? With Terra Group resources? But here he is, sitting and feeling good. It means that he somehow blended in with the reality and made an agreement with all the people he needed to. Yeah, and here I am with my knives. A courageous fucking windmill wrestler!

Besides the host there is another person in the office. He is a tough man with an unexpectedly intelligent expression on his face. Unlike the trader, the new person wears an army vest and some foreign camouflage. But he does not have a weapon—our host, we must assume, trusted no one.

"Mikhail,» the drug boss nods in his direction, "this is our guest, Denis. He goes by Vortex."

“Who do you work for?” Falin is interested. “What group, who is the head?”

“I am from Predator.”

The camouflaged one shrugs.

“Never heard of him. What do you want from me?”

“I have a business proposal. Some of our containers are at the warehouse terminal. I would like to retrieve them.”
“Everything that stands, lies, or swims in the terminal is mine. If anybody had anything, they can forget about it. It is strange that such simple things are not clear!”

“We have documents…”

“You know where you can stick them?”

That’s how it’s gonna go... the man started being an asshole right away. Why doesn’t the trader interfere? He promised to take over all the preliminary negotiations!

I throw a quick glance at him. And he, the motherfucker, is having fun! Leaned back on his chair, put his hands on his chest, smiling. It seems my guess about the bird in the hand is not so far from the truth...

“Nobody’s going to prove their rights. We’re not in the Chamber of Commerce... But to understand the nature of the cargo, they should be examined.”

“We will find them without the paperwork.”

“Well,” I shrug my shoulders. “I dare not interfere! I hope there is a strong current though?”

“What do you mean?” Mishka loses the thread of the conversation. “Current?”

“Or are you burying your dead people somewhere? I thought that since it’s a port, you just throw them in the water.”

Falin wrinkles his forehead and immediately ceases to look like an intellectual.

“What’s that got to do with… What fucking dead people?!”

“Containers with military cargo. Partially, but still… And like any serious cargo it has mines. So in case of unauthorized opening the contents would explode as well.”

“You’re fucking lying!”

“That’s up to you…” I’m getting up from my seat. “As I understand it, our negotiations are over?”

“Fuck you! One of them will explode, we’ll open the other one differently. There’s enough people!”

“I doubt it. No, it’s not how you’ll do this, I’m sure you will do as you must. It’s just that when one container blows up it will automatically blow up the rest of them, and you will have nothing to open. And a similar system with other cargo will power on. And since I don’t know where that’s located, I wouldn’t be surprised that something else will fucking follow. Personally, I would have done it just like that! Well, since this isn’t our territory…” I shrug. “Its problems don’t bother me at all…”

And then the owner of the office gets worried! The funny expression came off his face like a cow licked it off! But the man does not interfere. He holds the situation till the last moment. But here you’ll be very surprised! I haven’t spent my entire conscious life as a system administrator. I pulled

cables and sold computers. And not just computers…

You try convincing a project manager that the budget allocated by the accounting department has nothing to do with reality! No matter that the accountants all had MBAs and all manner of diplomas from different international training courses. They considered the shitty budget to be solid. In my opinion the first thing they teach you at school is to ignore unpleasant reality. Everyone and everything should behave according to some strange laws, developed by unknown specialists. And if something in life does not follow these rules, that's reality's problem.

What am I saying this for…

Yes, I know how to negotiate!

I've talked to pushier people than this! And if someone thinks that a threat is possible only with a muzzle or a gun or the threat of physical violence, they are very wrong...

"Our offer still stands. For now, anyway. You know how to find me. In five days I will receive instructions and will be ready for further communication."

And I defiantly ignore that camouflaged fellow. You're not here, man. You have no interest for me. Sit in your own terminal. And wait for it to blow at some point…

I can imagine what kind of thoughts are running through this couple's brains! I'm sorry, what kind of people are these? To write off four containers with military equipment just like that, so easily? And twenty disks with information? Yeah, and everyone forgot about the password? Yes, the flash key went upfront. So what? And who said that he had the only one? And copies of the disks can suddenly appear…

The door slams behind my back, and the local boss's assistant sitting in the hallway looks at me surprised.

“I’d like to get my gun. I have to go home now.”

“Just a minute!” He rises from his chair. “I have to ask…”

And disappears behind the door.

Clearly the boss didn’t say anything about me being able to walk away. And our negotiations ended too quickly, that doesn’t happen!”

He came back almost immediately.

“You are asked... A word!”

Nothing has changed in the office, except for the flushed face of the port boss.

“Three quarters!”

“Excuse me?” I look questioningly at the trader. I consciously ignore Falin.

“Mikhail demands three quarters of the cargo,» he reluctantly explains.

I shrug my shoulders.

“I have specific instructions, and I have already given them to you. I am not authorized to change anything in any direction. I am a courier. It’s my job to deliver the message and nothing more. Nobody gave me the right to discuss the instructions of the management. Do you have any questions for me specifically?”

“You, boy!” Mishka jumps out of its place. “Who the fuck do you think you are? Do you know who I am?”

“Mikhail Falin. Head of security at the warehouse terminal. Is there anything else I wasn’t told about?”

“I drowned hundreds of guys like you in shit!”

I keep silent and look at him. I smile... It must look a little strange from the outside.

Slowly, deliberately I move my jacket to the side.

“Like these guys?”

Falin’s gaze falls to the knives on my belt, and he suddenly deflates.

Silence…

“I’m sorry, but I really have to go.”

This time the assistant did not say anything. Silently nodded and showed me the direction. In his hands is already a familiar blindfold. Everything is clear—let’s leave.

* * *

When the door behind the Predator’s messenger closed, the owner of the office looked at the other person questioningly.

“Well?”

“He will come back! The boy is bluffing!”

“Shall we bet on it?”

Falin pulls a pack of dollars out of his pocket and throws it on the table.

“Where will he go?! Five minutes and he’ll knock on the door!”

The trader smiles and takes off his expensive watch, showed the dial to the person he was talking to.

“Accepted!”

In the evening, after talking to Denis, he visited his computer people. He put one of the discs on the table and explained the problem. His guys were cunning and did not think this work will be particularly difficult. Opening the password-protected archive is only difficult in theory. In practice, it’s as simple as cracking an egg. And indeed, at first the work went off without a hitch, the crack program winked green after a while, saying, the password is found, continue?

“Yes».

«The process of unpacking files has been started. Continue?”

“Yes.»

The screen blinked again and lines of messages ran, confirming the successful start to the file unpacking process. The trader was surprised—how naive do you have to be to rely on household archiving programs? Even his relatively modest knowledge was enough to understand how frivolous that was.

Some time passed, and one of the computer guys thoughtfully drummed his fingers on the table. He looked at the list of files.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s taking a long time.”

He clicked with the mouse to no avail, the computer did not react to it in any way. Pressing the keyboard buttons didn’t work either, the machine didn’t respond to any commands. At the same time the work continued, the lines of letters and numbers ran along the screen.

“What is it?” The drug boss felt that something was wrong.

“The computer froze.”

“What do you mean froze?” The boss nodded on the screen. “Everything works!”

“Fuck knows what’s happening.”

Turn off the computer? But the process of unarchiving can go sideways, and it might have other negative repercussions.

Okay… they wait!

However, they didn’t have to wait long, the computer suddenly rebooted.

On the screen it said: «No bootable device—insert boot disk and press any key.”

In short, all the files on the computer, as well as the connected disk, were erased, and the entire space previously occupied by the data was overwritten with zeros. According to experts, this made any attempts to restore the deleted data unpromising.

“What the fuck is this?”

The computer guy just shrugs.

“Yeah… fuck if I know. It ran some kind of malicious program.”

“Ran what?”

“A malicious program. There are some that imitate normal processes, but in the meantime…” The boss’s computer guy was obviously uneasy.

“Is there anything you can do?”

“I don’t know... The disk most likely won’t be restored, while the computer…”

“Fuck the computer! I’m more interested in the disc!” The drug dealer got mad.

“Where did you get it from?”

“Brought by one dude... Drill’s fucking acquaintance!”

“Drill?! Dronov, you mean?”

“Well, yes ... His name was Mishka. Why?”

The guy just shrugged.

“If Drill worked on this... Even if it wasn’t him, I can imagine the sort he’s acquainted with! In short, there’s nothing we can do. We don’t have hackers of this level in the city anymore. It’s Dronov’s signature thing, he did this often. With those who didn’t pay him, or shit on him some other way. It wouldn’t be possible to restore the info now, he knew what he was doing!”

“How did he not get killed?”

“He always kept a backup of the data himself... When the issue was solved, he gave the backup.”

“Backup... What the hell is that?”

“Well, that’s what we usually call a copy of the data…”

The boss thought.

“So you’re saying that…”

“Whoever gave you the discs probably saved copies. And he put the

defense on purpose to exclude the possibility of non-payment. Did you pay him?"

"Not yet...» said the Hood thoughtfully. "But he hasn't asked yet…"

"So he's gonna ask. The man's apparently,» the handyman nodded on the dark screen, «cautious, has provided for the possibility of getting fucked over, and may have a copy of the disks."

"And installing such a program... does it take long?"

"If you know how, not long."

* * *

So the Hood could argue without risking losses, he had calculated the messenger's tactics. Always have a backup exit! He won't risk anything if his opponent has all the trumps in his hand, it's better to postpone it. Reasonable. On the surface he looks like a simple dickhead! But no! And he himself must have something behind his back... That's why the old dealer did not argue with Mishka. What's the point? Money never hurts, and putting the smartass Mishka in place has been a long time coming.

"Mikhas," the trader called his assistant on the radio.

"Here, boss!"

"How is our guest? Trace him."

"Got it."

When the clock hand counted down five minutes, the owner of the office put the watch on his hand, showing Mishka the dial. He pulled out a drawer and swiped the pack of money in there.

None of them had said more than one word yet, waiting...

“Chief?” The radio station came to life.

“Here.”

“He got his gun, he’s leaving.”

“Trace him.”

“Got it.”

The Hood put the radio on the table.

“That’s all…”

«He’s not right…» said the stubborn port gang leader.

“So what? Right, left, up, down, he keeps to his words. You can deal with a guy like that.”

“Fuck him, I don’t need him! There are plenty of others like him, I just need to whistle and they’ll come!”

“Then, do me a favor and whistle, please? Guys like that will be of great help to me. No, I’m serious!”

The drug dealer even cheered up that everything was going the way he had foreseen. And the fact that Falin was rudely pushed face first into shit, that’s good! He was very arrogant, beyond his rank…

“I’ve got enough of my own guys, too…”

“Tell you what,» the owner of the office said more seriously. “Your guys, who will argue, they’re good! I saw them on the job, I admit it. What do you think about this man?”

“Well… He’s a joke. He must have bought the knives.”

“And where? Only one of us is a trader, me! And I don’t remember who sells these things, fuck, they’d not even risk buying them! Believe me, it’s not the first year I’ve been doing this shit and I know everyone! You said you didn’t know the Predator, I’ve never seen him before either. But I did hear about him. Because my guys are always listening.”

“And who the fuck is that joker?”

“I suppose you surely knew Foma…”

Falin wriggled and nodded. He had his own crap with the old thief, but he couldn’t help admitting that Foma was much higher in the criminal hierarchy.

“Well, he and the Predator had a fight. Foma gave protection to some dolt… Makar was his name. The Predator sentenced the whole group. And what’s telling is that he followed through. All of them, including women, by the way. That’s when Foma rolled out his quarrel. Kaban talked to our guest in person…”

Chapter 28

During the previous day the dealer took time to figure something out. Money can do a lot here. Even now.

“And as a result—they killed the old dog... Right in his lair with all his closest people, only Kaban survived. And that’s only because he wasn’t there that day. No one saw anybody! And then they found out, these shooters... Or rather one shooter, because traces of only one person were found. So, he was walking among them all this time. He ate, drank, and even slept in their building! And then, as his friends approached, they hit. Killed fucking everyone, only blue bullets rolling around on the floor…”

The Hood even smirked on the inside—just look how sour the other person is! It’s okay, kid, we’ll add to that...

“You’re gonna say bullets aren’t proof? That’s true. These bullets can be bought, I admit. More expensive than others, but you can buy them. However, our guest had whole magazines loaded with them. Let’s look further! You are probably surprised why this person just gives up on such a bounty?”

Miska nodded, here he agreed with the trader.

“That’s because he is not a trader, he earns his living another way. He’s a murderer, and he doesn’t give a fuck about anything else. Calm, cold-blooded, and straightforward. If he started to bargain with you ... I would be wary! But he didn’t. He doesn’t care, it’s not his product. And not his work. Our guest is really just a courier. He said what he was told. But the kind of person who sends such figures to negotiations is a special kind of person. I don’t understand him, that’s why I didn’t get in his face.”

“He offered you something like that, didn’t he?”

“And I am inclined to accept this offer. I came to this conclusion just now:

our guest convinced me. I'm convinced by his behavior. His words didn't differ from his deeds. He said so, he did so. And no emotions, like a robot. Behind such a messenger is a serious man, and now I believe that. And you… you live with your own mind."

The trader stood up, letting Mishka know that the conversation was over.

"If you have any questions, come by."

And now he'll have questions, the trader was sure of it. The Predator's messenger had left, but did he go far?

* * *

While I was being escorted to the already well-known location, I had all sorts of unpleasant thoughts in my head. What can I say to Kaban now? No matter how you spin it, it's mission failed. Yes, not utterly failed, but who cares? Containers stay in the port. Will Falin look for them? Well, it is clear that he won't turn the whole port upside down. He'd need way too many people for that! I doubt they don't have more important things to do. And I didn't tell anyone about the contents. Military property—understand that as you want! It may well be a bunch of folding beds and sleeping bags! But no, they won't think that. There must be something else. But they may think it's explosives, mines, and grenades. That seems more likely.

Yeah, it does… But Mishka refused to negotiate, having set a price tag that's too high.

Would it be better if I tried to approach him directly? Referred to the late Owl, returned the disks…

No. It wouldn't do any good, he's not the type. He is greedy to the point of indecency. He would ask why I didn't get into the fight earlier to protect his guys? Now there is nothing to talk about. Negotiations failed, and now I have to make it out of here! I'm being escorted to the meeting place, but after that… As long as I'm accompanied by the guys of the trader I can be

relatively calm, but when they leave, I have to keep my ears on the top of my head!

So.

Let's estimate.

They won't attack directly at the place of the meeting/farewell, it's obvious that the Hood wouldn't approve of such a thing. So, they will let me step back a little and they will most likely nail me. Bummer that I am not accompanied by Veremeev's guys now! It would be easier to breathe, I am sure!

But what I got is what I got. I have to get the hell out of here by myself.

I estimate the location of the buildings.

Will they give out the info about my previous route of exit? I'm sure I was traced back then. There is no one there now, but that doesn't mean that people aren't hiding somewhere. Survivors become smarter. Nobody will deny it. Let's assume the worst case, that they gave out that info. But they won't kill me on the square. They need me alive… for now. Not necessarily intact, but certainly capable of communicating.

Will they manage to make an ambush while we're walking?

I don't think so. To do this, they would have had to prepare in advance for the negotiations to fall apart. It takes time to pull people up, put them in place. And Falin didn't know anything in advance, he simply couldn't guess my refusal.

They will follow.

The Hood knows where I live. A serious group of pursuers definitely has a head start when moving. It's harder for them to get caught in something nasty than for a single person.

Looking for my footprints is a troublesome matter. And ungrateful. It is easier to overtake and ambush.

Does it mean that I can walk calmly for some time?

No.

Since I don't know all of Falin's capabilities, simply assuming he's a dumbass is idiotic. He did somehow survive the difficult struggle against the urban bandits. So he has a head on his shoulders. It's capable of coming up with all sorts of smart things. And that's why I didn't go anywhere. I go into the buildings, choose the most suitable place in my opinion, and duck in there. A standard office box, the city's full of them. Typical layout, cardboard interior partitions— in terms of defense it's complete shit. A pistol bullet, I'm sure, will go through most of this office.

But my possible pursuers would think exactly the same thing. They wouldn't think I'd come in here, so they wouldn't look here.

God protects the man that protects himself.

Therefore, I stay at the entrance for a while. A reasonable precaution, you know. It's a pity that there aren't many grenades left. But I also have simple explosives! A little bit, but I have them. And now my backpack is much lighter, I could have bought something from the trader! Oh, I am a dumbass!

Okay, now is not the time to tear my hair out.

I finish my work, get back on my feet...

And I freeze.

I hear a barking sound.

No, I've heard an ordinary dog bark more than once, of course. I even shot a couple of annoying four-legged beings a couple of times. But whoever heard a trained tracking dog following the trail wouldn't confuse it with a regular mongrel. The bark sounds different. There is some excitement in it.

I have heard it before. Back in the army, I visited my acquaintance who served in the kennel. And after that, when I worked at the company, I saw security inspectors at different Terra Group locations training their dogs. With the onset of this mess it would be logical to expect the poor (are they actually so pitiable?) dogs to scatter around the city and its surroundings. And, undoubtedly, a number of them did that. But there was still such a service in the port for sure! Visiting it on duty, I've seen guards with dogs on leashes. Yeah, «our four-legged friends." Well, some might be friends with them, but not everyone.

So that's what Mishka did.

I am expecting an invitation to a conversation, so to speak. I have serious doubts about the kindness of this comrade. It is even possible that this «conversation» will be accompanied by methods of «direct influence»—which is to say kicks and smacks. And the result will obviously be very unpleasant for me. If the Hood showed him the discs... Then it is better not to think about what awaits me. I have to refuse this invitation somehow!

The barking is getting closer. The dog is not too far away, it's excited, in a hurry...

Here's one idea.

Dogs are guided by their sense of smell, everyone knows that.

But!

There is a difference that was explained to me back in the day. Dogs can follow the trail, and then their nose is constantly on the ground—people

don't run on the walls, we're not spiders, after all. Or they can be guided by the so-called upper instincts. This is when they smell the actual person they're was looking for. A competent guide of a tracking dog will immediately notice that. But that's a competent one! And in the port, they mainly had guard dogs. There's no need for search dogs there, no work for them. Their guides (if any) are not trained in such subtleties, there is no need for that.

However, all these varieties of dogs bite equally painfully. Both can follow a trail. But the search dog can take an old trail, from twelve hours ago. An average guard dog will not be capable, it was just taught quite a different wisdom.

Let's play on it…

Risky?

Sure… whatever, I'm not gonna hide from the dog.

But I still have a few minutes! Maybe a little bit more…

What's the guide gonna think when his dog turns to the office? It is not the most comfortable place for spending a night, it is difficult to keep the defense, and it is too early to sleep. Maybe they'll think I decided to take something from a stash, that's very likely. Took it and went out the opposite window. A very probable option. Or, on the contrary, I could have left something behind. In any case this place should be checked!

There were six of them, and a big black dog, my main opponent at the moment. From people I can hide and stay quiet, they won't find me. The dog will smell me.

A good beast!

Strong and beautiful.

But an enemy. A predator like me.

I have no choice. It's either me or this animal. One must die so that the other survives.

The dog pulls at the leash, it can smell what it's looking for. Pulls the guide behind it. If he understood what he was doing, he would let the dog go. Let him tear at the enemy until everyone else comes running. When such a beast jumps at you, you don't think about the opponents running behind it. The priority task is to kill this dog.

You can't say I didn't think of that. And I even took some precautions. Just in case, so to speak. But I didn't need them, he didn't let the dog off the leash. So he ran into the house together with it, followed by the rest of the men.

A push and the gift goes towards them. Right there, on the awning above the entrance.

Louder barking, the dog hurries to its goal. It can smell the person it was told to track. The beast is excited, here's the goal, very close, just a few more rooms!

Alas…

A chair in the middle of the aisle rolled away, a thin wire stretches, and a free fuse snaps.

Boom!

Yeah…

Cardboard, even if it's a modern design, remains cardboard. And does not replace bricks. So what if it's good at shielding noise? It's not tough, there's no confidence like you have in a stone wall! At once several office partitions were gone. Or was it me that put too much in the explosives?

And meanwhile my gift made it where it needed to go. The wire stretches and pulls out the safety pin.

The awning couldn't stand either, six hundred grams of TNT is serious!

I ran out of explosives.

Pistol in hand, I walk in!

Dog, the poor dog... Still alive, breathing hard, but not going to make it. Didn't reach his goal, but he was so close! The weapon twitches in my hand. Happy hunting, beast...

The guide.

You are a malignant bastard, not a guide. The dog smelled everything better than you. He doesn't need a control shot, half his head is blown to shit.

The shot sounds again, and another dude stops twitching his legs. Also all covered in blood, no chance. Let him not suffer.

The third... well with him everything is clear. The blast wave knocked down some metal things and gift ceramics from the shelves, quire a shrapnel bouquet it turned out to be. The wall is fucking gone, the whole way!

For the same reason I also pass the fourth dude, he's gone too.

Shit, maybe I wasn't wrong to set up a kilo of explosives in one go?

The fifth, he was standing directly under the awning. I don't even want to look in that direction. Far-sighted people they turned out to be, setting up a guard at the exit!

Stop...

Where's the sixth?

Maybe he's lying on the street somewhere? He could have been thrown out there by the explosion, right? Yeah, right! The second charge was just outside, it would have been more likely he would fly inside.

A moan!

I sit down and turn around, raising my gun, just like Stepanych taught me.

Where is he?

I don't see anybody, the groan is coming from somewhere below.

I find him under a fallen cabinet. Relatively whole, at least no open wounds visible on him. Who knows what's happening inside him, considering that first he was thrown against the wall by this very object of office furniture, and then he was hugged by the blast wave from the second charge. If they had both gone off at the same time, then he would have had to be scraped off the walls with spoons. Korney told me about such things! I don't know how to do that yet, but that's okay! I'll learn more, seems there will be a lot of practice. He is alive and somehow even tried to crawl out from under the furniture. But when, knocking out the chips from the floorboards, two bullets hit the floor right next to his head, he realizes at once the foolishness of such attempts. I think he even stops breathing.

"Put your hands in front of you…» I whisper. And, given the possible confusion of the client, I say it again, louder.

He gets it! He freezes and extends his arms forward.

I squat and touch his earlobe with a silencer. He now lies under a good fifty kilos of furniture, along with what's inside, so any moves or jumps from this position will be very difficult to perform.

“Who are you?”

“Timokha Rvany.”

“Did Falin send you?”

“Him…”

Scared, concussed, not up for trickery!

“What did he want?”

“To bring you to him. To talk…”

“You sure he meant me? He didn’t make a mistake, did he?”

“He said, Denis Vortex, bring him to me. And if he doesn’t want to go, you can press him any way you want. Just as long as he can walk and talk.”

“I see... How inquisitive he is, this Mishka of yours. And he didn’t consider I might not be alone here! Okay. I won’t kill you, he has enough losses with the other five. You can go back, without a gun, of course. It’s close, you’ll make it there. Tell him we’ll be here one more day. If he wants to talk to me, he can come himself.”

“I understand…”

“And no funny business! Or I’ll use the rest of the charges! Or did we spend two days here for nothing? Carried these fucking boxes back and forth.”

He tries to nod, or as much as he can in his position.

“Tell him to leave his guards at the fence and walk here by himself. He will be called, you shouldn’t try to find anyone. And don’t worry, his head isn’t of any interest to anybody. Until, of course, someone pays for it.”

Then I pull off his vest and feel around in the pockets. There are no weapons. I order him not to move. I look around and find his assault rifle nearby. At the same time, I disarm the dude on the porch.

“Now,» I whisper ominously, «you can crawl out of your temporary grave. Slowly! Walk right away! And don’t look back.”

For about ten minutes he wiggles and turns under the cabinet, trying to get out. Then his white face rises over the pieces of furniture. The villain looks back and makes his way to the exit in a hurry. Then I see him through the window. Limping with his left leg, the «parliamentarian» waddles to the fence. That’s it, he made it into the breach.

Now it is possible to loot his comrades as well.

* * *

When one of his most skillful fighters appeared on the threshold, Falin didn’t even recognize him right away. The strong and determined man now looked like some strange parody of himself. Tearful, with dirty clothes, traces of blood on his sleeve and chest, all wrinkled and disheveled, he did not resemble the tough guy who just recently left this room.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Mishka was surprised. “C’mon, sit down!”

He pushed a chair towards him.
“Hey, who’s here! Get the medic here, a man is hurt!” The leader yelled at the top of his voice.

Timokha winced.

“Not so loud, my head feels terrible as it is, everything is buzzing…”

“How did that happen to you?”

“This dude… who you sent us after. He’s a difficult nut to crack, yeah…”

“And more specifically?” The boss frowns.

“Well… Mukhtar immediately found the trail, Mitya could hardly hold him back. We went, rather quickly. To the street… what is it… Hegel Street or something? In short, we got there quickly. They’re a maze you know, these newfangled offices. Mukhtar ran into one. He even squealed…”

Mishka poured beer into a glass and handed it to Timokha. He drank it in one gulp. He came to his senses a little bit and continued in a more confident voice.

“In short we ran in there. Olezhka shouted to keep Petka the Bald at the entrance. A lookout and all that… And we all ran inside. That’s when it fucking went off! I was blown off my feet, thrown against the wall! It went dark before my eyes, I couldn’t think of anything.”

Another glass.

“When I woke up, a cabinet was lying on top of me, I couldn’t breathe. I started to turn over to get out from under this shit, right? And then right next to the head—boom! Bullet! Another one! I’m lying down, frozen. They scratched behind my ear with a gun and whispered…

“Why whispering?”

“How would I know? He spoke like that the whole time… Whispering.”

“Okay,” Falin interrupted the soldier impatiently. “Next!”

“What’s next? I’m lying down. They ask me, ‘Who are you? And what the fuck do you need here?’ I told him…”

“Everything?”

“What would you do if you were me?” Timokha gets mad. “No, told him a fucking fairy tale about Little Red Riding Hood! He’s a real asshole, I’ll tell you that! A beast!”

“Okay, okay, don’t get mad. Hey, where’s the medic?”

“They went to get him.” The assistant poked his head in. “They will bring him!”

“Good!” The leader turned to the soldier. “You will have a doctor! And then what?”

“What… He said that if he wants to talk, let Mishka come here. We will meet him. And they said he shouldn’t worry for his head, nobody paid for it, so they do not need it.”

“Don’t need it, do they?” Falin looked mad. “Okay! Let’s see whose head is worth more!”
Timokha only shook his head.

“It’s a dead end, everything is mined three layers thick. This house was almost blown to pieces! Heavy cabinets were flying like boxes of matches! Bald, who stayed at the door, was torn in fucking half! I saw the guy—no skin, no face, like it was sawed off! They still have a few boxes of explosives in there, I saw it myself…”

The militant dropped his head on the table.

“Hey, you dumb cunts!” The leader jumped to his feet. “Where is that doctor?! Do I have to run for him myself?!”

The doctor finally showed up. With the help of other bandits the wounded man was taken to his lair.

Falin realized too late that all the other thugs should have been banned

from accessing the lair. Should have said not to bother a sick person!

But it was too late.

Timokha was delirious, and people lined up at his bunk trying to find out what happened. After a couple of hours, only chronic lazybones and deaf people didn't know about what had happened. And there weren't many of either, so…

In short, the ataman had a difficult choice ahead of him. Basically, he had been challenged. As if to say not to hide behind his guys, instead come and find out everything for yourself! We will not touch you. Of course you could declare it an ambush and not go anywhere. And there would have been people that believed that. But there would have been others... And to go alone to the same enemy, who, not even breaking a sweat, killed off several of the stronger fighters…

Everyone knew Timokha Rvany had left with his comrades. The problem seemed like it'd be easy. Six men catch up with some slime, beat him up a little, and bring to the ataman for a conversation. These missions usually went off without a hitch, so why would it be different now? It was difficult to imagine a Scav who decided to seriously oppose one of the strongest groups. Such scumbags could be out there somewhere! But to try and get into the port on your own? They even approached customs with great fear! Of course, he's a scumbag, but he's not an idiot. He wouldn't live for long.

But as it suddenly turned out, the outgoing group didn't face scumbags, but cold-blooded and experienced villains. It was impossible not to give them credit, carrying out work right on the borders of the zone controlled by Mishka, here you have to have balls of steel! Someone can hit at any moment, and hard.

But this didn't faze the villains. They carried out their dark work and killed five tough guys at once. And they didn't leave, staying instead in this place defiantly. No one should be able to do this! The gaze of the bandits increasingly fell on the ataman's room. No, there were no fools that'd go into

a frontal attack on heavily mined positions of an enemy. Five dead is enough! That's what the ataman is for, to solve problems like this one!

The last drop was the arrival of a medic from the drug dealer. And although everything looked more than decent on the surface, just some help for the wounded, the other meaning of this visit was clear to Falin at once.

«I know what happened to you…"

«Oh, I'll be a bastard if one of my dickhead crew is tattling to this asshole!» A thought flashed in Mishka's head. But outwardly the leader expressed his gratitude! The guys won't understand if he refuses selfless help...

* * *

As soon as the «parliamentarian» was out of sight, I rush around. I looted all of his dead friends within twenty minutes. This gave me three assault rifles and one shotgun, everything else was ruthlessly destroyed by the explosions. I found one TT pistol in the corner, where it was thrown by the blast wave. Three grenades, that's something already! Also bullets for all this good stuff.

Everything else was of little interest at the moment. Having found the plastic grey junction boxes in the back room, I drag them out into the corridor. I also find a coil of twisted pair cable—the system administrator made some reserves here! The can of construction foam brings me indescribable delight!

Great! This is exactly what I need right now!

And I start...

I spray water on the wall, wipe it off, foam the spot. It sticks better to a wet surface. Having prepared a few attachment points, I run back for the boxes.

Boom, press it on, move on.

As a result, about two meters from the floor, strange gray boxes appear on the walls. I cut the twisted pair cable with a knife and connect these boxes with the separated threads.

A look from the outside—does it look like mines?

From an amateur's point of view—yes, very much. A professional, I'm sure, would say a lot of hurtful things to me, and they'd be right! But there are no professionals here, and amateurs may arrive soon, and a lot of them!

My imagination runs wild and I add a couple more sinister boxes, decorating them with broken antennae from the TV. It looked very much like a controlled landmine. Having found a remote control to some fucking thing, I use tape to attach it to my left forearm. You can always say that it is from this remote control that all the detonation signals are given—go ahead, check! In general, at not too careful a glance, my setup is reminiscent of mining as it is shown in movies. And that is far from how it looks in reality. Well, let's hope that my future visitors have seen enough Hollywood action movies. Having ruthlessly destroyed the intercom, I pull out a couple of LEDs and attach batteries found in the remote control of the air conditioner. These glowing lights find their place in a couple of the boxes.

Now it looks even more real. How is such a thing staying attached to the wall? That leads to a reasonable question: «And how was it installed there? It's got to be heavy, it's supposed to be filled with explosives! So they even broke the wall or something? Seems so... And people had the strength and time to do this!"

You can see a green (or red) light in the hole. And what does it mean? Fuck if I know, I wouldn't mind finding out myself. So much better than Hollywood...

* * *

Mishka came to me the next day, close to lunch. I must give him credit, despite his behavior at the meeting the man was not timid. He appeared accompanied by a large cheerleader squad, but he left the whole party at the fence and continued proudly, alone. Even without a gun, strong move! My «art» on the walls was noticed almost immediately, he even slightly slowed down, it worked! He appreciated my art, so to speak!

Okay, let's meet the grateful fan of my work…

I let him pass me by and follow him carefully. When he disappears from the sight of his companions, I whisper:
"Stop! Don't turn around... It's dangerous to walk alone around here!"

Falin stops with his foot in the air.

"Can I put my foot down at least?" The leader asks grumpily.

"You can... Stand right here, someone will come to you."

I quietly go back, make a detour, and stomp to the exit, less quietly.

I push the door and exit out on the street.

"Hello!"

"Hello to you," the guest answers with a frown. "What do you want?"

"Now that's a question…" I open my arms in amazement. "If I wanted something from you, I would have come myself. Who's visiting whom, huh?"

"Are you guys settling up here for real?"

"What's the point of that? We have no interests here. My guys will come and we're going to get out of here. Well, you think all this was made just for my sake? Our boss is not greedy, but not to this extent!"

I “realize” my mistake.

“You can sit down! There’s a couple chairs…”

I brought them specifically to this place, right above my head is a gray box with an LED. A decoration of sorts. For those who understand.

Mishka, plopping down in the chair, saw it, of course.

“Can’t we sit down somewhere else?”

“Why?” I am «surprised.»

Seeing where he looks, I nod calmly.

“Ah, don’t worry, there are no nervous people here! No one will accidentally press anything! And it won’t go up by itself.”

“I want to ask about my boys.”

“An accident…” I shrug “You can complain to the dog, why did it run into the mines? Notice, the survivor was not touched! No one even said a bad word to him!”

“Yeah, and who was shooting?”

“At him? No one. Some bullets fell next to him, I admit. But it’s not written on his forehead who he is and where he comes from. Just in case… So he was warned. And as for the gun that was taken away, we can return it, we do not need it. And not only his, all the weapons will be given back. You can take it now, just don’t blow your back out.”
Falin thoughtfully bites his lip.

Weird conversation… incomprehensible. He came to a meeting, and nobody is showing any special interest in him. Just a casual passerby who

came by. And there were no accusations about trying to get me, either.

This is wrong!

That's not how any Scav should behave! Not to mention a real bandit! Any one of them has to find his edge over the competition. At least a barrel, a can of food, something! And especially when there is an occasion, like an attack.

On his own territory Falin is king, god and military leader. Any of his bandits can demand stuff almost with impunity. But when he leaves the port, that's it, nobody owes him anything. And any move can be returned tenfold, depending on who they luck into. Someone might pass, and someone else may show his teeth. Very sharp teeth, by the way. So here, Mishka can inflate his cheeks as much as he likes, but he can't expect support from anybody. And if we take into account his relationship with most groups, it can even go the other way.

The port, the terminal, they're great places, and a lot of people wouldn't mind grabbing them, and many would knock over the current head of security with great pleasure. And hit him in the back of the head as he's fallen, more than once.

But here things aren't going how he imagined. Obviously before he came here, he was trying to figure out all sorts of conversation options. He thought of this and that... Prepared answers in advance, questions, and it wasn't needed at all.

Everything is sideways.

Claims—none.

Guns—sure, take them away, less for us to carry!

No demands either. And to say we don't care who was snooping around here... They punished themselves. A fairly serious person to come to the

negotiations—I don't give a shit. No matter if it's him or not.

Who is sitting in front of him now?

A man who doesn't give a fuck? No one so tenacious and aggressive doesn't give a fuck. Those people don't live for long.

An ordinary Scav? Yeah, who risked crossing the line against a serious group? Ha-ha-ha!

Not a trader, they won't not miss out on a profit, ever.

Well, doesn't look like a sectarian.

And PMCs would have acted very differently right from the start.

So who is it?

But the ataman must decide something! Right now! He will come out to his people, weapons in hand…

What's he gonna say?

No one was there, but I picked up the guns? Is that right?

But they won't believe him! Somebody will definitely inspect! And «inevitably» he will explode—Falin believes as much himself. And then what will the survivors ask of him? The ataman must say something to his guys, he must! But what? He's in a stupid position either way, so he must show some kind of victory. Real or imaginary isn't as important now. He has to show some victory even if he pulls it out of his ass. I'm quite ready to play along, but the first step is not mine...

"Okay...» Falin finally decides. "What about these containers?"

"It's simple. The two of us come to you. With your guys, we go to the spots,

and there our specialist removes the transporting block. We take it out any way we want to Magistralnaya. Where, I don't know, it's a big box. They will tell us, I think. As soon as protection against transportation is turned off, they'll tell us. The trader sends his men, they make sure that no one is trying to set anyone up. There another specialist deactivates the mines, and then you can pick a container. You choose it and you can take it away, break it, bury it, it's your right. The charges will be removed, don't worry about it. But only from it! The protection will be turned on again on the rest and they will be taken away."

"By whom?"

"Not a question for me. There will be security. And that will be decided by the boss. Will that do?"

"What's inside?"

"You will see everything for yourself. But there is something delicious, I promise. Military equipment… could be folding beds. But they would hardly set those up with so many explosives…"

"When are you leaving?"

"When the convoy that's taking the containers does."

Mishka's silent, kicking at dust that covers the pavement, making some patterns.

"Who the fuck knows… You seem to be singing well... Look, you will be a target! Something goes wrong, your head will be the first to fly!"

"That's okay. It's won't be first time, but as you can see, I'm still alive."

"An interesting word, 'still.'"

Later, at night, having climbed into some deep corner, I repeat our

conversation in my head. After the leader took the surviving weapons (except the grenades, I kept those) and left, I dismantled my own art quickly. I pulled out the LEDs with all the stuff and ripped the lids off the boxes to show that all the mines were carried away by my people.

I didn't have time to think about this, had to run away in time!

So it's only now that I'm able to think everything through. For now, I don't see any flaws in my plan.

But!

I must keep in mind that Falin is not that simple! And he's extremely vindictive, you can't forget that! Don't turn your back on him if you can avoid it. Although who can you turn your back to without fear? Huh? No one.

Chapter 29

After listening to me, I don't think Kaban was even surprised. He sat there, calculating something, and pulled a tablet out of his pocket! To be honest, I expected anything from him, but not that! The look of an old-school bandit didn't fit with a modern gadget at all!

But he put his glasses on his nose and looked at something. He looked more like an accountant than a serious and dangerous man.

"Magistralnaya, you say... yeah... And how many escorts will there be?"

"No fucking clue! You weren't bothered about that before."

"Before?" Kaban grunts. "Well, yes... that was before."

Finally, after finding what he needed, he puts away the tablet, takes off his glasses, and ceases to look like a peaceful office worker. The cold-blooded cruel bandit is sitting in front of me again.

"Okay. Who will deliver the cargo?"

"To here? Falin. And he will be present during the transfer. So my advice is to find someone he can't tie you directly to."

"Just him?"

"Someone will act as a guarantor from the Hood, to make sure that nobody will kill anybody else at the meeting. Mishka demanded guarantees and the trader signed up."

"He also got into this? And what kind of profit will he get out of it?"

Oh, I'm gonna surprise you!

“None. He is doing it out of friendship, let’s say…”

That got to him, Kaban raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“No way… you’re not lying?”

“What’d be the point?”

Kaban is surprised. Or skillfully pretending to be. Something in his face indicates a certain intentionality. Let him make whatever faces he wants, he surely has some brick behind his back. And I have one too. So what now? Let start to measure whose is bigger? Why fucking bother?

It is clear that he doesn’t really believe me, and, if possible, will trip me up. Well, I’m not an angel either…

This time I made it to the port relatively easily. Half a hundred thugs armed to the teeth is a very impressive escort! After seeing that, the number of those in the area that wanted a fight sharply decreased.

It was only when we reached the agreed spot that we were left alone.

It’s me and a skinny man with a sharp look in his eyes. He introduced himself as Genka the Gloomy. I must say that the dude fits his nickname one hundred percent—during the trip he did not smile, nor did he say a word. But he looked around! Very thoroughly…

The meeting took place at the agreed location. We noticed a man sitting at a bus stop from far out. He had a light backpack and shotgun.

I make a gesture to Gloomy to tell him to hide here for now…

Whistle!

The guy with the shotgun jumps up, raises his weapon… But he didn’t shoot, he was waiting for the second whistle, as agreed. And when he

heard it, he whistled back three times and raised his gun over his head.

“The guide.” I turned to Genka. “Come on, they’re waiting for us.”

The boy saw us approaching, nodded and hung his weapon on his shoulder. He gestured the direction with his head. We did not have to walk for long. About a kilometer later, we met by a more impressive group, they even had a machine gun! Again, we didn’t say anything. Placing us in the center of their setup, Falin’s guerrillas quickly walk towards the port buildings.

They are clearly nervous about something, why would that be?

Everything was explained by Mishka himself, who met us near a stocky oval-shaped reinforced concrete building.

“Something weird is happening… Yesterday these fucking cultists appeared. The guys scared them a little, but they, against the usual custom, responded with fire and broke onto our territory. And then they disappeared! They were nowhere to be found… But there were like fifty of them, we only managed to kill two!”

It isn’t good news. But it doesn’t concern us right now.

“Where are we going?” asks the leader.

I nod at Gloomy to indicate that all questions should go to him!

“Pier number three.”

“Metal scrap, huh?” The leader is surprised. “Okay… Mihas, raise the people!”

The pier wasn’t far away, it takes half an hour to get there. The port people set up defense and Gloomy and I climb over a heap of metal. We turn, climb on the slippery wall of a container lying on its side, and my

companion stops. He looks around...

“There it is!”

The corner of a standard 40-foot container peeks out from under a pile of metal.

Genka takes off his backpack and pulls out a tablet and a radio.

Comes up to the side of the container, squats down and scrubs the dirt with his hand.

“Give me a knife…”

A minute later the marking plate bends to the side. Underneath it is a grey rectangle. Gloomy puts his hand to it and it blinks with a weak light. It’s a touchscreen display!

He enters a code, something beeps. My companion enters the code again.

“Error. Enter the correct code. Two attempts remaining,” some invisible speaker informs us.

A cold sweat breaks out instantly—this crazy man made a mistake! Shit, I can’t even run away... If this thing goes off…

“Vovan!” He brings the walkie-talkie to his mouth. “This shit doesn’t work... A mistake, they say…”

“Check the number!” The invisible person screams.

“Ah, fuck!” Gloomy starts moving and metal that cover the inscription on the side of the container. “Come on, get in here!”

“You have two minutes left. Please enter the correct code,” the speaker tell us.

What happens in two minutes? Or rather, what won't be happening? How strong will it blow?

The inscription appears from under the garbage.

"Four hundred and thirty-one eighteen F... F, motherfucker! Not P!" Genka shouts.

He runs up to the display and feverishly enters the code.

The speaker makes a slightly different tone.

"The code is accepted. Service menu available."

So... The service menu. Well, now we can screw up here, then it'll be fucked up beyond all recognition... Here I doubt they give you three attempts.

But this time Gloomy was on top of it, and the speaker confirmed the code is correct.

"Fuck...» Genka drops directly onto the scrap metal. "Almost went grey-haired. Motherfucker…"

Things got easier from here on out. Mishka's guys drove up in huge vehicle with a forklift. This absolute unit picked up the container and lowered it onto the trailer of a truck that drove up. By the way, the people are living large here! They have trucks, cranes, all that jazz...

As the technician explained to me at one point, after something went off over the city, most electronics that were on at that time broke immediately, including various vehicle control units. Diesel engines weren't affected, so they could start. Simplest carburetor engines worked like nothing had happened, there were simply no electronics to break. But all sorts of electronic gadgets died. That's why the approaching forklift had traces of newly laid wiring, and to the left of the driver there was clearly a self-made

panel with all sorts of switches. I assume that he controls the lifting and lowering of the load that way.

The second container was in the middle of nowhere, and even the forklift couldn't get there on the first attempt. Apparently they unloaded this box directly from the ship. I was astonished by the level of corruption in Terra Group. After all, such an operation could not happen without the captain's knowledge! But here it is, a container on the very edge of the pier, surrounded by all manner of garbage. So, they found an approach. After all, the explosive devices also require a precise adjustment, and this could only be done by very competent professionals.

Or I'm mistaken, and this information was simply stolen by the bandits? Could have been, but then my former employers also deserve judgment, losing such secrets? It ain't a bunch of kitchen utensils!

This time my companion is in no hurry. He thoroughly checks the container number, confirms it by radio, and only then starts to disable the protection.

That's a good choice, one close call was enough! We can live without courageous experiments...

The third container was buried right in the yard of the gangster's nest! It was serving as a kind of support beam under a bridge the bandits built over an improvised moat. At some point they were going to lay a heating main here, judging by the pipes next to it. But they did not have time, or changed their minds. Somebody lowered some empty containers into the unfinished trench, on which temporary metal floors were set up. To straighten the road, so to speak... And a full container was mixed up among the empty ones. And if it suddenly went off...

Looking at the faces of the people around me it's possible to read a whole range of emotions overfilling them. They already knew about the presence of large amounts of explosives in these boxes. I can imagine what the consequences would have been for the local inhabitants in the event of an

explosion. I think everyone would be in trouble!

In order to retrieve the fourth box we had to dismantle a big pyramid, and that took some time, even with a crane.

We only finished by three PM, and I'd consider that quick in the circumstances!

Taking into account all the fuss and nervousness we did well! With engines roaring, a column of trucks goes out the gates. The road was cleaned up little beforehand, most abandoned cars were removed, and the road was covered by Falin's guys sitting with weapons in the houses along the way. Nobody wants to risk anything. All the more so since the representatives of the trader, two dozen well-armed guys, have already arrived and are closely watching what's happening. They do not interfere, but all movements are recorded almost instantly. This good, because a stronger convoy is better for everyone. Fewer people willing to stick their curious nose into someone else's business.

The trucks' engines are roaring loudly, they can be heard from far away. It's impossible to rule out that the sound won't be heard by very malevolent spectators. So no! Sorry, guys, you haven't been invited!

But no unpleasant surprises, the column reached the specified location with no issues. On the way, we noticed machine guns on the roofs of the surrounding houses, and traffic slowed down a bit. But then Gloomy said that everything was fine, it was our people!

Still, the column stopped and a couple of people went to check it out. But they quickly returned, accompanied by a couple of thugs that confirmed Genka's words.

"So!" Mishka raises his hand. "We are moving slowly!"

The people of the trader get ahead, they enter a couple of buildings and take up positions there, sticking guns out the windows. Everything is clear

—independent control, if you will.

Here comes the representative of the welcoming side. I don't know him, and it seems that Falin doesn't know him either. Having said a few words of greetings, the new arrival looks around for Gloomy. When he sees him, he nods.
"Everything all right, good man, did the work right. Give the device to Quickie, he will do the rest."

Genka passes the tablet to a small man whose face is half wrapped in a handkerchief. Apparently, he has a reason to hide his appearance. Well, fuck it, I'm not worried about these problems at the moment.

The guy comes up to the container and does something with the tablet.

"It's ready...» he says with a squeaky voice. "Open it, it won't explode…"

He walks up to the door to prove his words.

The hinges squeak, the inside smells of chemicals, grease, and something else.

The container is full to the brim with boxes. They are well fixed in place, belts and cable ties securely keeping the load in place, stopping things from tipping over. Quickie nods at me when I'm looking at it.

"Let's go, you'll help me…"

There's nothing to say except that the person who set the traps in here was very clever! Now I understand that even if we got in through the wall, we couldn't have avoided the detonation, this was also taken care of.

The two of us find and remove more than a dozen charges that were evenly distributed throughout the interior. Three of them were installed directly on the boxes with very explosive content. So if it went off it would have been serious! At the spot, everything would have been simply blown to

dust, and a large area around us would have been thoroughly cleared out.

We take out the charges and put them in an empty box, filling it more than halfway.

Falin was very impressed by what he saw, he recognized and respected our work. Apparently he only now fully believed me.

“You can look at the cargo,» the man with the covered face said to Mishka. “In the meantime, we will defuse the charges in the second container.”

The second, third... my hands are tired. What if I pull at something else... I need a break, and I tell my companion that. He doesn’t mind.

We sit right on the boxes, get some water and something to eat.

Falin also comes up.

“Is it really the same thing in all the boxes?”

“You’ve seen the inventory…» Quickie shrugs.

He’s right—on the inside of the door there is a plastic bag with papers.

“Then we’re gonna take the second container!”

I shrug, what do I care? I don’t mind, and I think Kaban’s representative won’t mind either.

With a roar of the engine, the truck with the container turns around.

I have a reasonable question—how are the bandits going to move the other three out of here? I don’t see any trucks nearby! But we have to assume they somehow thought of this. Kaban doesn’t look like a fool, and he won’t let things play out without any control. In any case, no attempt is made to stop the other trucks.

The loader lowers the remaining containers directly on the asphalt, and the entire column leaves the rendezvous area.

The representative of the dealer comes up to me.

“You owe us…”

“Give me a minute, I’ll take off the last charges and I’m all yours.”

“Good,» he nods. But he doesn’t go far, keeping me in sight.

That’s it, break is over, we’re defusing the defense system again. A talented man built all this, I wouldn’t have thought things like that. Oh, if only we had Korney here! He certainly knows more than we do.

But this work is also coming to an end.

And then Kaban surprised me again!

Somewhere from behind some houses a small convoy comes out. Minibuses, trucks, all manner of old trash on wheels. It must have been collected in the streets of the city. They have an undeniable advantage—carrying capacity and the ability to drive on even the most littered streets. This is quite a good solution for our current task.

People jump out of the cars and hastily start loading everything. A couple minutes and already a few cars roll out quickly in an unknown direction. I’m not really worried, per our agreement with the bandit leader my entire share is to be delivered to Khokhol’s warehouse. How he does that is his problem.

“Are you finished?”

I turn around—it’s the representative of the Hood.

“Yes.” I give him a flash drive. “Everything here, as agreed. Just in case, here’s another one…”

Both flash drives immediately disappear in his hand.

“The boss asked me to tell you that the group that entered the port today came there for a reason. They are looking for a man with two knives that belonged to their priests. And they know where to look for you.”

“Will they come here too?”

“They might,» the man shrugs. “But that’s not our problem anymore. You have fulfilled your obligations, and we have fulfilled ours. We have nothing else to do here, farewell.”

Short and clear. Thanks for that, though, any information is useful. I run up to the cars and ask them to load most of the explosives we removed, along with all the relevant tech, into the cars that will take my share to Ogryzko. They don’t mind, though I notice some nervousness among them. Hmm, it seems that everyone knows that the sectarians are interested in me! Yeah, seems that I, as the most interested party, get this information last!

If that’s the case I gotta run! And quickly!

Nothing for me to do here anymore, so no need to hang around.

Kaban’s people are in a hurry! Cars are loaded without paying any attention to the best way to fit in the boxes. They just shove them in, barely stopping short of kicking them in. For some time I stay by the boxes, quickly stuffing some useful things into my backpack. Nobody cares, nobody pays attention to me.

It’s time to get out of here!

I jump past the checkpoints guarding the loading area. The people there are more busy scanning the windows and alleys with their guns, and no one is

interested in the person leaving. Not one of their own, but he was allowed at the container unloading locations, so he had the right to be there, the higher-ups know better. If he's leaving, who gives a fuck...

I turn the corner, and the noise of the work gets quieter right away.

What would any normal person do right now? They'd run away faster the speed of sound!

And they'd be running to their grave...

I strongly doubt that Falin's column slipped through completely unnoticed. I'm sure there's already a number of villains coming here from all sides. Yeah, it's strange to attack a serious convoy. You might not ever leave. But a single runner is a delicious target! What if he managed to grab something? And in any case, a loner is a target!

So I'm not running anywhere.

I choose an entrance to a residential building, drag my backpack in there and begin to arrange all sorts of surprises for those that would risk finding out what kind of interesting stuff might be here. No one came in here for a long time, so why should they show such strange curiosity today? As you already know, it killed the cat! And since the poor four-legged animal didn't make it, humans have no chance.

It is possible to pet a cat and in return it will purr in gratitude. But you can't expect that from some stranger you meet on the stairs of a house, so we will skip petting them.

The first floor is finished, and now it's an extremely unfavorable place for taking a walk.

I skip the second one, and, having broken down the door, I climb into one of the apartments. Five TNT checkers pasted with tape onto the wallpaper, detonator, hid the wires in a closet... Now I have an emergency escape

route through the next entrance of the building. What, the sectarians can teach me something useful. How did they break through the wall back then? I'm no worse than them.

Now I can continue my art on the second floor.

My backpack has gotten lighter!

I pulled like three kilos out, and there's still something else left, I won't leave empty-handed.

A break, or I'll drop dead from overwork.

And now time for a feast!

From the container I took two standard rations, I even got some orange juice. Well, not juice per se, powder you mix in water. But even that is a gift from God!

A grown man is sitting in an abandoned apartment, all sorts of thugs wandering the streets, and he's drinking juice…

Meanwhile it got a little darker and I calm down a little. Nobody came, so maybe it'll pass…

I jinxed it!

There are assault rifle bursts in the street and somebody wails horribly. It seems that it has begun… I jump up to the window and, pressing against the wall, look out.

Fuck if I know who's killing who. There are already several bodies on the ground, and there is a fierce firefight on the opposite side of the street. Where can they go now?

These shots will draw all sorts of curious people, and it is better to meet

uninvited guests in a well-equipped position than on an empty street. There is always a chance that nobody will go into this entrance. There is no one shooting from here, no figures jumping out, what is unusual about this door? Here's to hoping they pass…

However new people join the shootout, and someone is shooting from the other end of the street! In such a situation it is better to sit quietly. There's no reason to blow up the wall to the next entrance, it's not any better there.

"Let's move back!" Someone is yelling below. "This door! Bring them here, we'll bandage them up!"

What door does he mean, I wonder?

Boom!

Shots even subside for a moment. Until now the opposing sides only shot at each other, no grenades were used. And now there was a serious explosion!

Naturally, many people are interested in this fact right away—what's happening there?

Yes…

Sometimes you shouldn't be too smart!

If I hadn't set any traps, no one would have paid any attention to this building entrance. They would have carried in the victims, bandaged them up in a hurry and left. And that's it, nobody would have gone upstairs! Who mined this entrance and why? Why not the next one, they are located right next to each other! Even if we suppose it's the insidious work of the opponent, they would have mined all the entrances in order to safely kill as many people on the other side as possible. From the exclamations below I can hear that no one else found any surprises in the neighboring entrances. That means that they didn't want to come in here specifically!

Why not?

What's so interesting?

There are a lot of people downstairs... Okay, I have to assume the wounded and the people helping them are all dead, the explosions were delayed to get as many people as possible in the blast zone.

So I brought this on myself...
At least somebody was slowing them down. And now everyone with limited mobility are gone in one fell swoop. And very soon the people will run up the stairs...

It's clear that the first ones will get it. But not all of them!

And there are no more surprises on the stairs!

Okay, I wait, I won't come up with anything else here anyway.

The attackers can throw any probes they want, it won't help them. There are no tripwires on the stairs, nothing to catch on. Just a piece of ordinary cardboard lying on the stairs. But it's ordinary only at first glance. Inside there is a tricky switch with a thin wire coming out from it.

I don't know why, but for some reason basically everyone steps on a piece of paper lying on the floor. Not simply on the floorboards, but on the piece of paper! Why? Fuck if I know, something in human psychology probably makes people do that…

Why does a cat get into a cardboard box? Or lie inside a rope circle?

I don't know.

But there must be some explanation in this case as well.

Now I will test this fact in practice…

Rustling, some kind of clanking… throwing a probe?

Barely audible mumbling, then boom!

The explosion hits unexpectedly, the wave rolls up the stairs, raising dust that hadn't settled yet, and I'm already running down! A throw, and the grenade disappears between the railings. Hopefully it'll fly all the way to the bottom…

The apartment, pull the closet open, the cigarette lighter clicks, and run like hell!

I feel a push into my back when I'm already on the fourth floor. And again it hits me on the ears...

But there's no time to hang around, I need to run downstairs again! Another throw, a smoke grenade rolls down the stairs as well. I've been carrying it for so long for a reason, right?

I stumble, there's a dead body on the stairs. I pick him up and drag him to the side, fall to the floor, placing him over myself.

Shouting!

A bullet that has ricocheted from somewhere flies by, squealing nastily.

"Upstairs!"

The sound of running, like a herd of elk running.

A lot of swearing…

"Over there!" I yell after pulling my head out from under the dead body. "In the apartment, something exploded there!"

Some of the people go there, the rest of them stumble in the clouds of smoke while running upstairs. It became extremely hard to breathe!

I rip off the dead man's neck scarf, wet it from my flask with orange juice and tie it over my face, leaving only my eyes clear. Oof, that makes me feel better immediately!

Now I put the dead body on my shoulders and walk down.

Downstairs there's a crowd—dead bodies, blood, screams, swearing…

"Here." I put the dead guy on the floor. "He seems to be alive…"

"How about you?" A dude is pulling at my sleeve. "There's fucking blood all over your shoulder!"

"A moment…" I cough. "I need to catch my breath first…"

"Smart call! Go ahead and breathe!"

Continuing to cough, I get out somehow and sit right on the asphalt. People are running past me, I move aside so I'm not trampled. A little more and «suddenly» I find myself near the corner of the building, the entrance was on the edge of the house!

Wait a little longer, then fall to the side, simulating felling ill, and roll down along the wall and around the corner.

But I'm not running anywhere!

Fuck knows what's happening. Who, what, I don't have a clue! It's as dark as a black man's... you know…

But the bench nearby is very useful! Enough garbage, grass too…

Rolling under it, I put my backpack next to myself and pull the last

grenades out.

That's it, there is nowhere else to go! This will be my last place of battle. And my grave if I am not lucky.

The turmoil is not subsiding. It seems to be getting worse.

The people are trying to understand in vain where the unknown villain has disappeared to. It is possible to make out shouts and a few words, which tells me the next entrance was thoroughly searched. And with the expected result. No one was found there either, obviously. Some crazy people went into the basement as well. Well, good luck to you!

But shouting among them also tells me something interesting. If I stay alive there will be information to reflect on.

The outcome happens unexpectedly—there are assault rifle bursts at the end of the street. It seems by the sounds of the shots that they've attacked a third party. Or fourth... I wouldn't be surprised if it's even the fifth! The crowd is immediately divided. Someone is going to drag victims home, while the rest, pumping themselves up with swear words, go to break the necks of the unknown opponents.

Good luck to you guys! All of you…

Chapter 30

“He’s gone.”

“How?!”

“No one knows. He was traced back to a specific building. We made sure that the courier didn’t make it out of there, and then pointed the Scavs there. He was supposed to be taken and handed over to us. In any case their leader promised us that they would only shoot as a last resort, and even then only at his legs. However, they couldn’t resist and got involved in a shootout with some other dudes, but that couldn’t have interfered with the main task. That group was quickly driven away, so it didn’t affect the work.”

“And how come they failed this simple task?”

“Something exploded right on the stairs, and shooting started. Then again and again. It was not clear how, but a breach into the next entrance was made, and the Scavs immediately rushed there. But... In pure numbers we have about ten dead and twice as many wounded. The courier disappeared as if he was never there. The shots drew in some other gang, and an unpredictable mess began. We had to step back to avoid drawing attention to ourselves.”

“Bad. Very bad! And where do we find him now?”

“We are working on that. I will ask the traders…”

* * *

“Have a seat, gentlemen! Coffee?” The deputy sector commander of the B-3 sector was very hospitable.

Indeed, when you suddenly get such guests, it is best to display maximum

caution.

And the guests... besides the well-known counterintelligence agent, there was another serious person in the room.

John Dirk is an almost legendary figure. The head of the special operations department of the Tarkov USEC group. Honer had never seen him before, but his specific appearance combined with his famous beard left no doubt about who was now sitting across from him. With a man like this, it's best to be friends! Especially now, in this environment it may be the last chance. Whatever happens, such people do not disappear without a trace. This one will make it out of any altercation with a suitcase full of dollars. And he'll also pull out those who are next to him. So, for all possible reasons you have to be as polite as possible with such a guest.

"The coffee is very good!" says the visitor.

«Why are they here?" A thought flashed in his head. "Forbet is silent and keeps away. What has counterintelligence dug up? Mark is usually very wordy, and his silence in this situation can mean only one thing—he's not the leader in this office. Then who is in charge here?"

"You're probably wondering what caused our early visit." The bearded man squints.

"Yes, sir." Honer did not lie. "To see you here, in my place? I'm really guessing…"

"It's very simple, dear Charles. It's regarding your recent guest."
"Excuse me?" The owner of the office tilts his head to the side. "We had a lot of different visitors here…"

"Are you a medium, Charles?"

"Um... I don't understand, sir…"

“Then how can you explain the fact that you managed to keep in touch with a dead person for such a long time?”

The deputy sector commander of B-3 is baffled and rubs his chin.

“Your guest, this person.” A photo falls on the table. “You talked to him personally, didn’t you?”

“Yes, it was him.”

Dirk turns over the photo.

“Karasev Denis Viktorovich, an employee of the computer center of the logistics department of Terra Group. He lives... lived at Listvennaya Alley number five. Apartment fifteen. He died, my friend! With witnesses! And this fact was confirmed by several people. Moreover, several more of his colleagues died right there too. And their bodies were also identified. How come was he suddenly resurrected?”

“Sir... I didn’t know any of this! He only told me his name... And his nickname, Vortex.”

“Yes, that’s what his coworkers called him. It was Karasev, but how did he get out of the grave? And why did he work in your favor?”

“I reported... And besides, I wasn’t the only that talked to him! And this man didn’t look like a dead man or a zombie. Talking, shooting... And by the way, the sectarians are very afraid of him! Mark can confirm!” Honer nodded at the still-quiet counterintelligence agent.

“He told me everything,» the man nodded. “And in light of that, there were a lot of questions. Including some questions for you…”

“Ask, sir! I’m ready to help!”

“I have no doubt. And the very first question will be this!” Dirk tilted his

head to the side. “What does the notorious Predator have to do with the former employee of the Terra Group Computing Department?”

When the deputy sector commander of B-3 closed the door, Forbett coughed, attracting the attention of Dirk, who was thinking.

“Is there something you want to say, Mark?”

“Yes, sir. Honer is sincere, he said the same thing last time.”

“I have no doubt about it. It was important for me to see someone who had personally spoken to this mysterious person. Understand his impressions.”

“There’s also Eugene Morlow. He spent a lot of time with him. Cooperating…”

“Of course, I’ll talk to him too. But that’s not the issue... No one seriously thinks Karasev is a dead man who has come to life. But there is a report from the task force about the successful sweep of all those involved in the Tunnel project. Three people confirmed his death at once! And what do you make of that?”

“They need to be interviewed, sir! It is quite possible that…”

“Are you a medium too, Mark? Or can you even get a dead person to talk?

“Alas...» the counterintelligence agent says.

“They were local. After the mission, they were…”

The counterintelligence guy nodded, he didn’t need such obvious truths explained. It was normal practice for the company to do so.

“Karasev, like many of the people here, served in the army at headquarters, he sat at the computer. He never took part in any military operations. I doubt he even knew how to shoot! And here... Everyone who saw him says

one thing—he's an experienced and cold-blooded fighter. An extremely dangerous opponent. The question is, when did he become one? Or do we not know something about our former employee? And if that's true…"

The counterintelligence agent broke into a cold sweat. A spy within the company's logistics division? No, some Russian agents were definitely there, but among the people involved in the Tunnel project? Not the best information...

"But it's not even about him,» Dirk frowned. "The Predator... Who is that? The rumors are different, but a man who uses such a person like Denis as a regular courier must be a very serious opponent! This level of cover?"

"Russian counterintelligence?"

"I doubt it... In the current situation it would be very difficult for them to work here. It's a layer cake my friend! We are on one street, Bears on the other, and tomorrow it'll be the opposite. The Scavs are wandering around, trying to snatch their piece. And underground is hell knows who. And how do you get any work done here? When even information as simple as where we'll sleep tonight is completely unknown! There is no connection, but sometimes you can pass something through the traders. And even cans of food from beyond the external cordons costs as much as a bottle of expensive whiskey! What counterintelligence…» John waved his hand.

* * *

I've forgotten how to enjoy the sun! Just lie there and watch the sunrise. Feels good in your soul. Warmth! Sunbeams warm my overgrown face pleasantly.

It's quiet here, only a slight breeze blows across the roof of the former fuse booth. It pleasantly cools the skin of my face and playfully gets under my collar. Let it... I don't even want to move. And not because I might fall, but just because of laziness. The roof is flat, tarred, you can lie down without fear of rolling away somewhere.

It should be said that it is a peculiar building. It is two-story, with tall brick walls on the edge of the roof. There's a lot of stuff on it! The tall, delicate tower with cellular communication antennas, some boxes, plenty of wires. Everything is decorated with a formidable "Stay away! Fatal danger!" sign. I have no doubt that it used to be like that, the power here was pretty serious, and it could burn someone up easily.

But that's in the past. For a long time cellular communication has kept silent, computers do not work, there is no Internet. Numerous wires are not running electricity. Antennas are silent and only the wind whistles in the interlacing bars and oscillators.
But the memory that it is better to stay out of here hasn't gone anywhere. So nobody tries.

And that's why I lie quietly under the cover of the high wall and, like a big cat, warm up in the sun.

A day passed, the crazy night, full of smoke and filled with the rumble of shots, starts.

I survived...

How many times now?

Doesn't it matter?

Survived, then be happy about it! Enjoy the sun and the morning breeze. Live as long as you can!

And I live...

THE END

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